**OLIVIA CHANEY, *SHELTER***

Give yourself time to be absorbed in Olivia Chaney’s *Shelter* and you’ll garner rich rewards. As church bells toll the final notes of “Roman Holiday”:into the last song—“House on a Hill”—the album’s moments of illuminated resolution urge you to immerse yourself once again; to absorb the feelings of comfort Chaney hopes the record will bring.

*Shelter* is an unforgettable album of astounding musicianship, exquisite voice, and insightful composition. “But,” says Chaney, “people may be left wondering, is my glass half full or half empty. My favorite art often teeters between the two. I always come back to dualities and contrasts: rebellion/obedience, sacred/profane, ritual/chaos, love/loss, protection/vulnerability.” But as the lyrics, haunting vocals, and deceptively simple instrumentation work their magic, in *Shelter* you hear that Chaney’s quest has shifted to a new level, with a new sense of hope.

Chaney’s background and experience are revealing. Born in Florence, Italy, she grew up in England’s Oxford, in a household whose intellectual and artistic engagement were complemented by an expansive musical soundscape. This included Billie Holiday, Mozart operas, Sandy Denny, Prince, Tracy Chapman, Bert Jansch, Michael Jackson, and Joni Mitchell. Chaney became a “reckless wild child,” clocking up experience beyond her background and years. Narrowly escaping self-destruction, she “wound up with a scholarship to London’s Royal Academy of Music,” where she took in everything the conservatory had to offer. Her unstoppable curiosity led her further afield, from Ligeti to West African pop, Edith Piaf to Laurie Anderson, Mary Margaret O’Hara to Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Sonic Youth to Sappho, Kate Bush to old-time country music—deeply absorbing it all, while finding her own voice.

The impressive range of artists she has now worked with includes Zero 7, the Labeque Sisters, Martin and Eliza Carthy, Vesel, and Kronos Quartet, with whom she performed two songs on the 2017 Nonesuch album *Folk Songs*; she has also opened for Robert Plant in New York City. Most recently she fronted a Grammy-nominated album, *The Queen of Hearts,* with Oregon alt-rock band The Decemberists,forming a new outfit, Offa Rex.

In *Shelter*, which was produced by Thomas Bartlett aka Doveman (Sufjan Stevens, St. Vincent, Glen Hansard, Florence Welch, The National, Martha Wainwright, and many more), Chaney continues her exploration of both the tension and conflict between tradition and contemporary life, and a modern young woman’s search for love and wholeness. Pushing the listeners back and forth through time, she drives them and the tracks on, transforming challenging themes into something fruitful. “Colin & Clem”begins: *“She is young/He is modern/She comes from/A time forgotten/He strives for things we hate/Believes machines will liberate/A class he is/And escaped”…* While in “Arches,” the refrain’s twisting, lyrical melody is both a romantic and modern plea: “*Impossible and true/I hang/From the ceiling/Turn me off/Or turn me on/Darling/Won’t you let me be light/For you.”*

This album is a conscious, natural progression from Chaney’s highly acclaimed 2015 debut, *The Longest River*.**“**Collaborating with Thomas Bartlett was crucial for me,” says Chaney. “His close affiliation and influence over such a varied and acclaimed group of artists were of enormous importance. It felt that his taste and sphere of understanding were as diverse as mine. Thomas understood my musical agenda. He prioritized my compositions’ meaning and lyricism, rather than jumping on the bandwagon of noisy popularity. I wanted a recording as intimate as the songs and their form. The only other musicians are Thomas and Jordan Hunt, my longtime collaborator who adds strings and background vocals on select songs. It’s just the three of us playing every sound you hear.”

*Shelter’s* eight originals and two covers by turn dazzle and arrest. Chaney’s insistence on material as broad as songs exploring class and religious conflict in Northern England; to a radical re-write of Frank Harford and Tex Ritter’s “Long Time Gone,” made famous bycountry-crooners the Everly Brothers; to Ray Davies’ suggestion that she write an homage to American classic *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*; to her bold rendition of Henry Purcell’s iconic seventeenth century “O Solitude,” shows that Chaney fits neither a conventional nor convenient mold. She admits, “I know I’m unorthodox.” As *Rolling Stone* says “a multi-instrumentalist, singer and songwriter [she] defies categorization.” It takes strength to be one of the few. Luckily for Chaney, her strength lies in her musical elusiveness and talent, her difference. She is that rare thing, an original. But she modestly observes that originality is not really what she is after.

“I don't believe in it too much. I think I just see time and creativity as a continuous line. And that if we’re interested or thoughtful, or lucky, we can expand upon what’s been said in all the ages before us.” Chaney takes “great inspiration from both the loss of, and importance of, folk cultures. I’m trying to integrate this in a post-industrial age while communicating with people on a timeless level**.”**

Acclaimed as she is for “making the old new,” Chaney is not a nostalgic. The songs on *Shelter* are beyond time-bound fashion. They mirror Chaney’s belief that “a preoccupation with being contemporary is an overrated concept.” In *Shelter*’strack, “Roman Holiday,”the present is gratefully celebrated, central to the song’s swing back and forth through the ancient past, and the hope that the “now” will lead to a fulfilled future.

“*This is our time/ Under umbrella pines/ . . . maybe joy will win/Maybe this will bring/Fruits we never ate before/A feast on futures lore, that we’re building/Through broken triumphal arches/Thank God, you exist.”*

*Shelter* is rich and many-layered. At once subtle, beautiful, edgy, its music and lyrics are always memorable. And as Jon Pareles stated in the *New York Times*, “In her quiet way she’s radical.”

Not the least of Chaney’s radicalism is her form. Honed over time, it is her trademark blend of folk-like instrumentation and mainstream pop, underpinned with the rigor of the Classical. This is well exemplified in “Shelter,” for example:

*“In this house/On a hill/Where I’ve come to see/What is real/All I find is illusion*

*/Urgently she sees Spring grow/Build to a stream/On it flows/Till Autumn falls, golden*

*Leaves her silent, scolded...Not wond’ring why the days end/With the sun in the West/At night I hang/From the ledge/By moon, by Pleiades/In all the shining mystery”*

“I had been on the road a lot and was struggling with the grit and loneliness of urban life. I think I’d been questioning what home, belonging, a sense of purpose, and my own culture even meant. I’m not sure I believe that home is necessarily a specific place. I think it’s more often somewhere that houses love. I’d been craving wilderness, and a return to essentials for a long time. Then, while touring in the US, I realized the place I needed was already in my life. It was ancient, barely habitable, and remote.’

So, “the home for my work on *Shelter* was a crumbling eighteenth century cottage in the austere but magical hills of the North Yorkshire Moors—a family retreat since my teens, with no electricity or plumbing, where the only water comes from a spring. We brought out an Arts and Crafts Bechstein piano and an old wood burner to the house; and as summer’s end turned to autumn’s shorter, colder days, the room with the upright and stove fuelled my stay.”

While writing in Yorkshire, Chaney fell into the rituals and limitations of basic living. By isolating herself like this she discovered what her needs were, what home might be, physically, emotionally, and culturally. “I went to dark places, faced some of my demons. Being there also inspired me and became a metaphor for the very thing I was writing about.”

*“Everyone rallied round to help me dream/But when I came to that place I did not feel/The way I was supposed to/Things, it seems, that others do/So here I am, free from distraction/Beauty, fear, at my disposal/But I dismiss each kernel as/A start I cannot finish/Give me warmth, give me shelter/Give me food, bring me water/But till I come to befriend and face/The demons do persist” —“Shelter”*

“In relation to songwriting I’ve always wanted to dispel the Romantic notion of needing to suffer in order to make good art. I also wanted to suffer less in life!” And yet, ironically, Chaney found that going out into the wilds and a “house on the hill,” a “shelter,” might have been an exploration of just that. “In the album I’m trying to talk about the extraordinary ways in which humans can feel ‘sheltered’—either through a material sense of security, or through religion, or spirituality. A sense of belonging transcends not only a roof over your head but also meaning in your life.

“All these things are in the songs. That's why the album is called *Shelter*. It’s a paean to what the little cottage on the North Yorkshire Moors represents and to downtown Manhattan, replete with its wealth and growing homeless population, the latter’s plight encountered every day en route for the studio. It’s about the communities we encounter every time we set foot outside our doors. In this sense, *Shelter* is perhaps a metaphor for Old World versus New World, simplicity versus sophistication and complexity, folk culture versus modernity. I don't think any one of those is possible or even desirable without the other. But it's how you straddle and embrace them both, in life and in art that matters. I was so happy to find a title track that’s an umbrella for the meaning of the whole record.”

Chaney hopes the album becomes something of “a refuge for listeners; a *Shelter*.”

*—Jayne Checkley*