

Beth Orton: *Central Reservation* Reissue Review

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By Robert Ham

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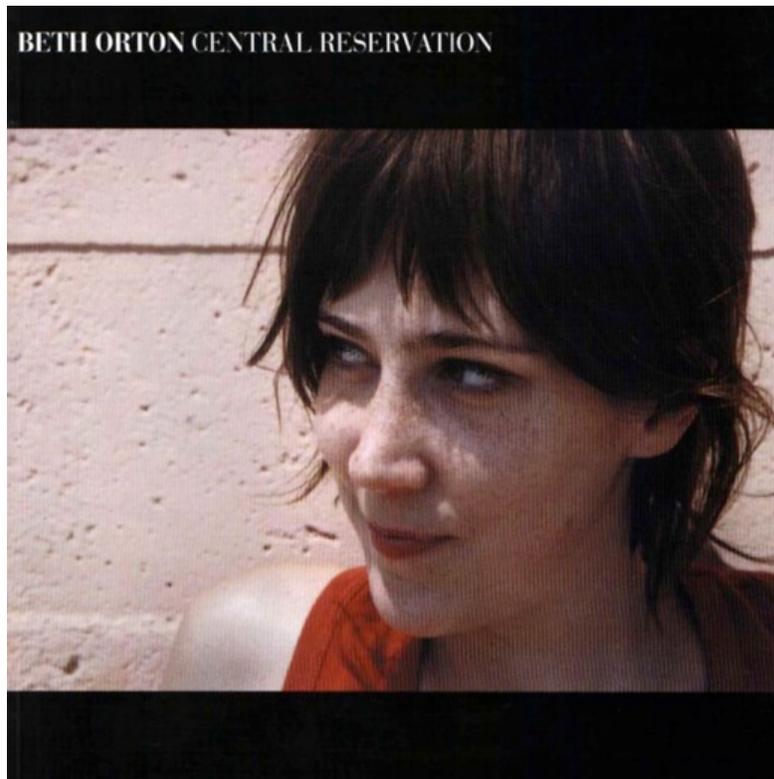
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Beth Orton's second album, *Trailer Park*, was a statement of purpose into a UK music scene that was still feeling the last waves of Britpop and was quickly getting ensconced in various strains of dance music. Her association with electronic artists and producers like the Chemical Brothers and Andrew Weatherall certainly helped draw some necessary attention to her work. But her meshing of folk-pop with trip-hop only worked in small moments.

The gentle colliding of worlds felt much more solid and purposeful on her follow-up, 1999's *Central Reservation*, which is being re-released this week with an added disc of live sessions, remixes and b-sides.

Orton seemed at this time to have worked out the kinks of this new sound she was helping shepherd into being. The songs on this album felt much more mature, free of the cute, but lightweight sentiment of a song like "Someone's Daughter" (featured here on disc 2 in acoustic form). In its place is a much more sensual side ("I can still smell you on my fingers and taste you on my breath," she sings on the title track) as well as an unusual facility for blues songwriting (see the ominous "Devil Song"). No matter what it all seems to come out in breathy Sandy Denny-like tones, but she can't fight who she is.

Another key to the success of this album are the producers who helped Orton tap into the varying sides of her musical personality. Mazzy Star songwriter David Roback taps into the dark shades of violet and midnight that curl around the outside of her voice by keeping the music acoustic and sparse. Victor Van Vugt, who worked on *Trailer Park*, maintains her then-modern pop sound with

downtempo beats and lucid bass tones. And Everything But the Girl member/house producer Ben Watt aimed to do as he did for his wife Tracey Thorn: turning Orton into a dance floor diva. He came damn close to succeeding.

The second disc does as all these deluxe reissues do, filling in the gaps in and around the recording of the main album. There is some context here with a handful of demos, including versions of the title track and "Couldn't Cause Me Harm" that show how complete Orton's vision for this album really was. The "Sessions at West 54th" material is nice to have, especially to hear how she adapted many of these songs for acoustic guitars, even if the recording quality feels a little tinny in comparison to the rest of the LP. The only unnecessary addition was the Latin house remix of "Central Reservation" tacked on for the fans who must have everything.

As nice as this package is, the only thing that *really* makes this reissue worth picking up is the interview with Orton in the booklet, where she goes over her changing relationship with the album and these songs. Otherwise, this set feels like an odd choice considering there wasn't any remastering involved and therefore how close it sounds to the original CD issue (which can likely be picked up used at your local record shop). But if it is keeping this fine album in circulation, and hopefully getting some money to Orton so she can keep making music (her most recent LP *Sugaring Season* was one of the best albums of 2012), we should welcome this with open arms.

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