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### Beth Orton: Central Reservation: Revisited

By **Evan Sawdey** 1 August 2014  
PopMatters Interviews Editor

Remember that time when Beth Orton released one of the greatest albums of the modern era? No? Well, don't get too worried: you're not the only one who missed this.

Oh sure, Orton's first two albums garnered her two very well-deserved back-to-back Mercury Music Prize nominations and she sold modestly well in the UK during her rise to critical prominence in the early 2000s, but even through her numerous William Orbit collaborations and her frequent association with the likes of the Chemical Brothers, Beck, and Ryan Adams, Beth



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#### Beth Orton

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Orton always seemed to be pegged as a perpetual cult artist, one who, for whatever inexplicable reason, never truly shook that “folktronica” tag that always hovered over her.

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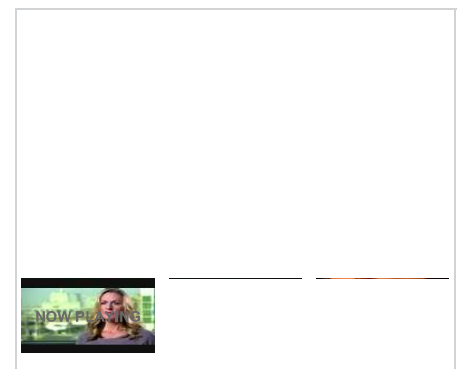
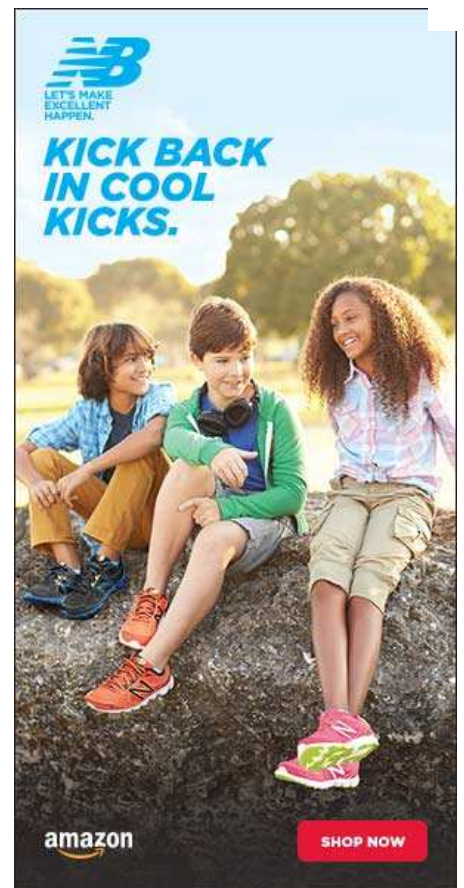
That very tag seemed to be easy categorical shorthand for critics, because even though she used keyboards very sparsely on her early albums (exception made of course for her uber-rare 1993 Japanese dance-pop disc *Superpinkymandy*), it was referenced in virtually every bit of press that was ever written about her, all this despite her albums being dominated by acoustic guitars, lush string arrangements, and natural drum kits. The production never defined her songwriting: it was her songs that could work just as well in solo acoustic gigs as they did when given poppy Ben Watt mixes. Her songwriting was always personal, visceral, and relatable, and despite a half-decent promotional push on *Central Reservation* (and an even bolder one on the very commercial 2002 effort *Daybreaker*), Beth Orton was more of an artist that fans were always discovering on their own—a secret among hardcore music aficionados and NPR archivists alike—but never one suited for mainstream success.

Truth be told, Beth Orton never seemed like she was necessarily gunning for chart-topping success, because even after her appearance in the Leonard Cohen: *I'm Your Man* documentary and with a Best Of compilation to her name, she seemed happy simply moving to her own groove, taking a six year break between her brilliant Jim O'Rourke-produced 2006 disc *Comfort of Strangers* and her profoundly underwhelming 2012 set *Sugaring Season*. Still, even casual fans admit that it's hard to top the quality of her first two albums, and after Sony Legacy gave *Trailer Park* the deluxe treatment in 2009, it was no surprise that *Central Reservation* would get similar treatment on its 15th anniversary (although why it was released by UK upstart 3 Loop Music is an odd turn for sure).

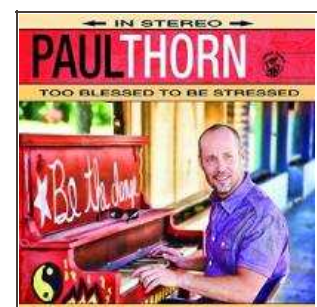
Given no remaster job to speak of, the first disc of *Central Reservation: Revisited* is the original album exactly as it was released in 1999 (save for a slight cosmetic note on the track listing, the closing “Ben Watt Mix” of the title track now being referred to as “The Then Again Version”). What's perhaps most amazing about it is that *Central Reservation* doesn't feel like it has aged a day, and it remains a stunning, filler-free album of nothing but the best set of songs Orton has ever penned: folk songs with a rock heart and a confessional bent that never once overstays its welcome. It's easy to describe Orton in nothing but buzzwords, but hearing her deeply resonant songs firsthand is another thing entirely.

What makes *Central Reservation* better than the yearning-but-uplifting *Trailer Park* isn't just the fact that the tone is slightly darker. *Central Reservation* works due to Orton's focus and commitment to each song, as there isn't a single vocal performance that doesn't feel 100% genuine & there isn't a moment wasted musically. Opening song “*Stolen Car*”, for example, burns with a nervous energy, Ben Harper's wild electric guitar texturing giving the song drive and verve, highlighting descriptive lines like “You were sitting / Your fingers like fuses / Your eyes were cinnamon”—simple, sharp, and precise details that set the scene but never tell you directly what to feel. It's moments like this that make Orton as effective a storyteller as she is, luring you into the nature of the moment instead of telling you the moral of the story.

In typical attention-grabbing fashion, she follows that firestarter of an opener with a lush, romantic, string-drenched number called “*Sweetest Decline*”, which, according to T. Cole Rachel's brief-yet-casual liner notes, is a song that Orton considers one of her all-time favorites, decorated with gorgeous jazz piano (courtesy of Dr. John) and a string section that does more than play the same refrain ad nauseum, switching up their playing style at numerous intervals to keep things lively. Although Orton explored some cosmic-jazz textures on *Trailer Park*, she really refines those instincts into tight, formal structures on *Central Reservation*, with augmented vibraphone bends in “*Couldn't Cause Me Harm*” giving a specific kind of texture without meandering too far off the pasture. It's so easy for your ears to simply “accept” into the grooves that Orton and



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collaborator Ted Barnes are able to conjure for this album, but only upon close examination do you realize how well-considered their choices are, these detailed chasms of sound giving way to Orton's immaculate songcraft.

What makes *Central Reservation* such a uniform success isn't just Orton's work as a lyricist, but also the fact that every single song has its own unique, powerful identity. "So Much More" feels like a minor-key desert torch song, while the Terry Callier collaboration "Pass in Time" embodies the idea of a "jazz campfire jam" like no other, Callier's throaty wail complimenting Orton's beautifully plain, introverted voice perfectly. From there on, there's the oboe-sounding guitar lead of the plaintive "Love Like Laughter", the hard trip-hop beats that decorate the moody "Stars All Seem to Weep", the open echo chamber of soul that is the title track, etc.—it's all so distinct, so expertly executed, and so rooted in the warmth of Orton's voice that it's darn near impossible not to fall under her charms. Her songs are beautifully unassuming, making potent points but never drilling you over the head with them. Even when she tosses in faint biblical allusions in the tumbleweed dirge that is "Devil Song", she marries it to a personal story arc, "you" and "I" being the dominant clauses even as she makes seemingly-simple (and grammatically questionable) lines like "Devil was my angel" sound like potent philosophical tangents.

Part of the reason for this rarefied air of greatness is that, especially on this album, Orton utilizes her voice to its fullest capacity, her quietly strained inflection used to give her words real weight in lieu of just singing them passively. Perhaps there's no greater showcase for her vocal chops than on the guitar-and-voice highlight that is "Feel to Believe", a sparse strummer that starts quiet but builds to a fierce roar, her delivery of the line "the soul and / the spirit / each have got their own limit" being so powerful that you actually hear the mic limiter cancel out for a brief moment. It's a one-take performance that gives the listener goosebumps, the kind of song that doesn't lose its potency on a single replay. Given that it's followed by the somewhat poppier Ben Watt mix of "Central Reservation", it doesn't diminish the fact that "Feel to Believe" could very well be considered one of the best album closers of the past two decades. The fact that the Ben Watt remix is tossed on makes it of no loss though, because, as a whole, *Central Reservation* is a stunning, flawless record, far removed from the "folktronica" tag that keeps weighing Orton down, as it is just a full-bore folk masterpiece in and of itself.

So while the prospect of reintroducing *Central Reservation* to a whole new generation of listeners is undoubtedly exciting, collectors who picked up the thorough Legacy Edition of *Trailer Park* come in expecting an equally-abundant barrel of bonus material for *Central Reservation*. Although the bonus disc here does feature a good deal of extra ephemera, a lot of it is more intriguing than it is revelatory. For one, it cops the very same David Lynch-inspired "I Love How You Love Me" from the *Trailer Park* Legacy Edition (which, due to whatever legal nonsense, the Legacy Edition pulled from the rare Mojo soundtrack and 3 Loop culls from the "Stolen Car" single—both of which are the same damn song). Eight tracks here are acoustic numbers pulled from a West 54th Street Session, which is actually great if not just to hear Orton tackle stripped-down renditions of songs that are normally defined by their ornate studio arrangements. Unsurprisingly, even her renditions of production-heavy tracks like "Stars All Seem to Weep", "She Cries Your Name", and especially "Sweetest Decline" still hold up with remarkable potency. Already-acoustic numbers like "Blood Red River" and *Trailer Park*'s "I Wish I Never Saw the Sunshine" don't offer much in terms of insight, but are still pleasant to hear in an intimate live setting.

If you kindly excuse the needless inclusion of the "Spiritual Life Ibadan Remix" of "Central Reservation", the best bonus material included here are the demos of four songs that ended up making the album cut, as they sound notably different than their finished versions. While "Love Like Laughter" is given a solemn, solo-acoustic take, the demo of "So Much More" bears almost zero resemblance to its finished studio form, as a flurry of cheap synths and simple drum hits




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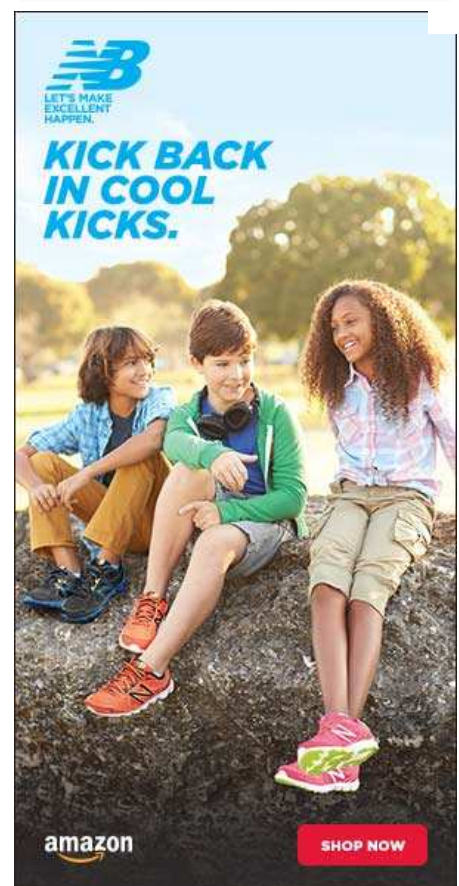
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make it seem like this track was initially destined to be some weird and ill-fated electro experiment before it was mercilessly stripped down to its powerful essence. A full-band take on "Central Reservation" is interesting to hear given that her players end up giving the tune a bit of a bossa-nova twist, and while the "Couldn't Cause Me Harm" demo sounds pretty close to its finished rendition, the most notable inclusion is that of a free-form trumpeter, really amping up the song's jazz elements exponentially. This actually could've worked decently as an inclusion on the album itself, but given its somewhat-meandering nature, tipping the album away from too much of a jazz bent was probably a wise move in the end, as Central Reservation exists as a disc that synthesizes its influences instead of being defined by them—too much trumpet may have pushed it into unnecessary genre definitions.

While all of this new insight into the songs is helpful, Central Reservation still stands as a triumphant, powerful work from a songwriter at her very best. 15 years after its release, Central Reservation hasn't aged a day, and even with the strength of Comfort of Strangers in mind, Beth Orton was never able to better herself than with these 11 defining songs, each one expertly written, dutifully performed, and masterfully sequenced together. She may never truly break out of her cult-status bubble, but so long as Central Reservation exists, that cult will never stop growing.

Rating:  9  
Extras rating:  7



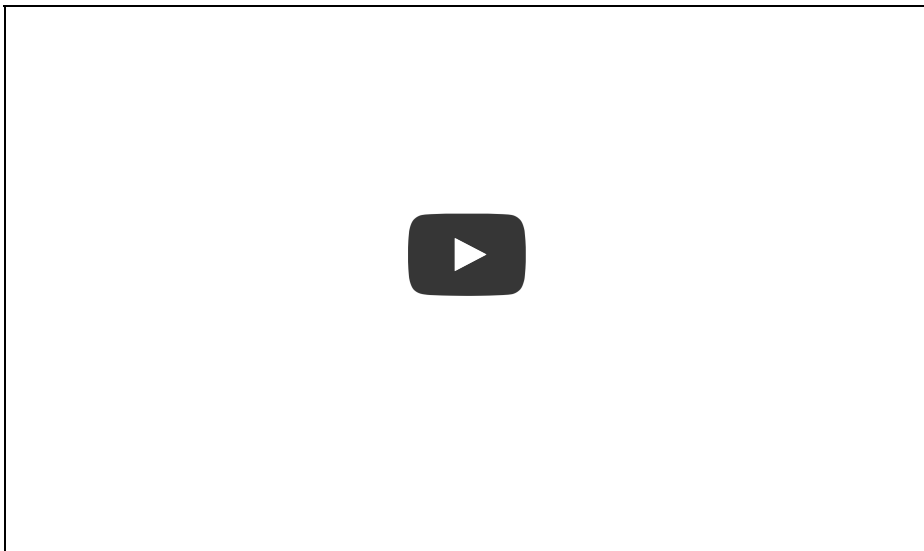
Evan Sawdey started contributing to PopMatters in late 2005, and has also had his work featured in publications such as SLUG Magazine, The Metro (U.K.), Soundvenue Magazine (Denmark), the Daily Dot, and multiple national newspapers. Evan has been a guest on RevotTV's "Revolt Live!" as well as WNYC's Soundcheck (an NPR affiliate), was the Executive Producer for the Good With Words: A Tribute to Benjamin Durdle album (available for free at GoodWithWordsAlbum.com), and wrote the liner notes for the 2011 re-release of Andre Cymone's hit 1985 album A.C. (Big Break Records), the 2012 re-release of 'Til Tuesday's 1985 debut Voices Carry (Hot Shot Records), and many others. He currently resides in Chicago, Illinois. You can follow him @SawdEye should you be so inclined.

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Melanie McGee Bianchi · 17 days ago

YES! I almost drove off the road once listening to "Feel to Believe." Bravo for the latent recognition of this masterpiece ... the song & album both.

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Cowtools · 17 days ago

What timing! I just revisited this album yesterday, and it holds up really really well. I actually prefer the remix of the title track and wish it was the 'official' version, and she should have included 'Best Bit' on here too instead of an EP. It makes me sad to think of the time when Beth Orton, Ben Harper, Ryan Adams, Gomez and other modern folk-rock-with-a-modern-touch artists could have been the next big thing but somehow weren't.

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