

# JUANITA STEIN

## HOWLING BELLS

This year marks something of a milestone for noir-rock quartet Howling Bells. It's a mighty ten years since the group first formed, back in their doe-eyed youth, in their hometown of Sydney. The quartet, who rolled onto the British indie scene in 2006, were in contrast to their guitar-led peers at the time. All sweeping melodies and dark rumbles, Howling Bells' filmic influences, coupled with the powerful and commanding lead of frontwoman Juanita Stein, resonated with critics everywhere. Heralded on British shores, their eponymous debut would go on to signal something of a masterstroke of world-weary pathos. A decade on, Howling Bells have worked their beguiling brilliance into one of our finest imports to date.

Born in Melbourne, Stein is the daughter of songwriter and musician Peter Stein and former stage and TV actress Linda Stein. Her childhood was – unsurprisingly – filled with melody and musicianship from an early age. “If your dad’s a chef, you’d watch him cook,” she says. “As early as I can remember, my dad just played guitar with his musician friends.” And in such an inclusive and relaxed atmosphere, it didn’t take long before she was called in to contribute to one of her father’s own recordings: “He stuck me in the studio when I was five years old, on a bunch of old telephone books, and I would sing backing on some of his tracks.”

Spending days in her bedroom bashing out Beatles tracks, Stein was a ‘90s teen living on a diet of Nirvana’s grunge glory days and stoner rockers Lemonheads; the latter of which would go on to introduce her to one of rock’s most understated heroines: “I was a big fan of Juliana Hatfield growing up,” she explains, tucking a piece of errant hair behind her ear. “She’s the queen of indie pop. She dated Evan Dando (of The Lemonheads).” She smiles: “You know how they always say, ‘Behind every great man lies a great woman?’ Juliana Hatfield was that great woman behind him. Amazing, tough and creating the most melodic indie pop ever.”

Taking some of Hatfield’s wry commentary and woven guitar lines, Stein’s debut compositions were similarly anguished but, above all, rested in the strong confines of female powerhouses like Hatfield and Polly Harvey: “I like the way PJ Harvey plays guitar, [it’s] strong and direct.” Originally picking up a Fender Musicmaster II for early band recordings, Stein has since shifted onto the more meatier offering of the Gibson SG Standard: “Physically it’s a lot easier for me to get different sounds out of it than any other guitar I’ve played. It’s more versatile than the Mustang.”

And she’s not alone; it’s a strong choice for solid rockers everywhere, with Sleater-Kinney’s Carrie Brownstein and alt-rock and former Ash guitarist Charlotte Hatherley both picking up the double cutaway. For the recording of the band’s latest, and fourth full-length, release ‘Heartstrings’, this switch was hugely beneficial to the energy behind the songwriting: “I found that guitar incredibly inspiring – I wrote the entire album on that one in the basement of our house and then recorded it. Now I’m playing with it. It’s kind of become a bit of a good luck charm.”

She’s recently added a new instrument into the Bells’ fold, which is no stranger to the limelight (Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead picked the model as his instrument of choice). With its semi-acoustic body, Fender’s Starcaster was originally produced in a vain attempt to rival Gibson’s ES-335. It’s certainly effective in recreating the band’s rollicking riffs and Stein’s chugging rhythm lines. “For me, it’s a good shape and weight, comparatively to other hollow bodies,” she explains. “It’s got a much heavier sound than a traditional Telecaster too.”

### The Bell Hit

Rolling onto the scene at a time when Fratellis and Franz riffs were being chanted across festival fields everywhere, Howling Bells’ sound dwelled in lonely churchyards and moonlit plains, Stein’s vocals curling around the haunting guitars like languishing city smog.

In fact, it’s these dark tendencies that continue to separate the foursome from their contemporaries, gaining them more comparisons to crackling old country films than the current charts. “I’m super obsessed with atmospheric sounds,” Stein says. “I like music to be all engulfing and dark and beautiful. The Malekko phaser is great for that – when Joel breaks into a lead riff, I’ll put that on.”

Picking up her love of classic rock and roll and ‘70s greats (“It’s just a shame every time you think of someone like Hendrix, people think of boys and cock rock, but it’s not like that. He was such a beautiful musician and has so many songs that people have never heard that are just like waterfalls, gushing with loveliness”), it’s not surprising Stein has gone down the boutique route to find the perfect distortion for her SG’s thick and resonant tones. “The Hotcake is my favourite overdrive pedal,” she says. “They’re only made in New Zealand.” Invented back in ‘76 by Emlyn Crowther (who



&gt;



went on to join Crowded House on drums), the pedal was a hit with Stein's punk heroes in '90s era grunge – Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth and J. Mascis of Dinosaur Jr both adding the distortion to their set-up.

When it comes to piecing together the band's muscular and haunting guitar lines, Stein credits a lot of their picturesque tones to soundtracks rather than the '90s slacker scene. Teaming up her Fender Super Reverb backline with Boss' Tremolo TR-2, she's pleased with the ambience that looms over the tracks: "The tremolo really gives the big Western, David Lynch echo, as does the reverb, which just makes everything sound huge and spooky," she explains.

It's not just 'Twin Peaks' surreal and superficial setting that has dominated the songstress' vision for the band's sound – she also talks animatedly about French art house soundtracks. "I spent so much of my youth listening to Yann Tiersen: 'Betty Blue', 'Amélie'. It's magnificent," she smiles. "Soundtracks are the bomb. My big dream for the band would be to do something like that – give us an entire film and we'll do it."

#### Digital Hearts

Just as Stein is fond of the cultural nostalgia of films like 'The Virgin Suicides', the bright lights, big city of Hollywood drama is another influence that went on to shape Howling Bells' sound – and not necessarily for the greater good. The outfit

were lured to Las Vegas for their third album 'The Loudest Engine' where the record was produced by Mark Stoermer; it was a difficult time for the band, with energies and spirits somewhat waning. "The time in Vegas was really about as far away from our hometown experience was, on so many levels," she says. "Super sized, super vacant and super weird."

And the weighty pop credentials kept flying in, as the band bagged the support slot alongside Coldplay on their 'Viva La Vida' Tour, with Stein contributing backing vocals on their track 'Up With The Birds'. A far cry from the singer's visions of a panoramic film score, despite the record's lukewarm response, Stein has remained headstrong and passionate about Howling Bells' vision and sound.

"I think you as an artist, or really as a person, adapt to your environment so you respond consciously or unconsciously with the people you are working with and what they want from you," she explains. "It's very challenging as an artist to stay as focused as you'd like when you've got a bunch of people who want to move you into a certain direction. That's development, though. You have to grow and learn."

Indeed, a lot has changed for the unassuming Aussies. Band members have come and gone ("Before this record, Gary joined the band and the other guy went back to Australia. It kind of feels in a way like it's taken on a new lease of life

and given it a really fresh new energy") and the whole process of releasing an album is entirely different. Long gone are the distant days cordoned off from the world in an insular studio space: "The last record we released was only three years ago, but this one feels far more connected technologically. The response you're getting is instant."

As the band get set to release their fourth and most intimate record to date, Stein and co. have asked fellow willful soul engineer Catherine J. Marks to join them on the ride. Stein explains: "She is remarkably focused and she really just kicked us up the arse, which is brilliant."

Marks has also just begun working with north London upstarts Wolf Alice, and it's not surprising Stein seems to have found something of a companion in the engineer: "She's certainly carving a name for herself as the kick-ass rock producer."

Juanita Stein has been just as determined when it comes to having the business savvy to span a decade in the industry – and it's this incomparable drive that has lead the band to where they are today.

For Stein, this has always been an old fashioned ride of rural instrumentation – it just took them a bit longer than they thought to get here. "Some bands bullseye a first, second and third record, which is unbelievable - I don't know how they do it. We've definitely had an epic journey thus far." ■

## PEDAL TO THE METAL

- Boss Tremolo TR-2
- Crowther Audio Hotcake Distortion
- Malekko Omicron Analog Phaser
- Line 6 Verbzilla
- Fender Musicmaster II
- Gibson SG Standard
- Fender Starcaster