



SANJOY Narayan

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**FACE THE MUSIC**  
Laura Marling played in front of two sex shops on a Soho sidewalk when she was denied entry into a club to play her own gig

# Just Women

A league of extraordinary female singers kept me hooked this week

**A**LL OF this past week, I've been listening only to women singers, mostly new, a few old, but all women. It wasn't part of a plan or anything like that really, it just so happened that whatever I downloaded – a couple of podcasts, a few mp3s that came into my email inbox, an old CD that I'd burned some months back and kept in the car but forgotten to listen to – all of them had only women singers or musicians. And each one of them was fabulous.

It began with a young British musician called Mica Levi, sometimes known as Micachu (her band's called Micachu and the Shapes). All of 21, Mica Levi began writing music at the improbable age of four and also studied violin and composition formally in London. Her music has both the exuberance of pop as well as the carefully constructed nature of grander, classic compositions. I heard a song called *Calculator* off her debut album, *Jewellery*, and was instantly hooked. I later learnt that Levi wrote a composition for the London Philharmonic Orchestra last year. Seeing her – unruly curly hair and much-too-big T-shirts – you wouldn't have guessed. On her debut album though, Levi doesn't balk at using unusual noises – the sound of a breaking bottle or a vacuum cleaner. Advance copies of the album have received rave reviews from discerning critics and the Internet buzz is gathering momentum, both likely indications that we're probably going to hear more of her in future.

Many young British female singers who've made it big in recent years, besides creating great music, have assiduously built a public image that has helped them strike mainstream success (think Amy Winehouse's antics in and out of rehab or Lily Allen's cheekiness and bratty hellfire attitude), but 18-year-old Laura Marling is refreshingly different. She doesn't appear to be building an image to sell her records (two, I think is what she has on her roster to date). With her pronounced British diction and strong voice, Marling enjoys the spunky reputation of having played on a Soho sidewalk in front of two sex shops when she was denied entry into a club to play her own gig. She was 17 and judged by the management of the venue, which happened to be a gay strip club, to be underage. The sidewalk gig was a huge success. Marling sings about her own insecurities – she left school to sing and tour – and does some practical plainspeaking in her songs. Her voice, which belies her youth, is the biggest attraction of her music.

Several – not all – of the women I heard for most of the past week were British though, as I said, not all were new. Polly Jean Harvey, better known as P J Harvey, is nearing 40,



**MIND-BLOWING**

Mica Levi (above, centre) with her band Micachu and the Shapes and P J Harvey and John Parish (right) whose latest collaboration *A Woman a Man Walked By* is a must buy



and nearly a dozen albums old. Her first album, *Dry*, came out in 1992. I know many fans of P J Harvey's music, her unneringly honest lyrics about love, sex and religion and her way with the guitar. But nothing had prepared me for her latest collaboration with British guitarist, John Parish, on the album titled *A Woman a Man Walked By*, released on March 30. I heard the first track, which is called *Black Hearted Love*, and knew that this was a keeper. On the album, Parish plays grunge-inflected guitar and Harvey sings brilliant songs that have deep and even twisted lyrics. When critics put out their lists of best albums at the end of 2009, I won't be surprised if *A Woman a Man Walked By* (nice name, by the way, isn't it?) is on several of them.

## MICA LEVI BEGAN WRITING MUSIC AT THE AGE OF FOUR

As I said, I did listen to many other British women through the week, including Tracy Anne Campbell and her excellent Glaswegian band, Camera Obscura – their new album, *My Maudlin Career*; I shall buy as soon as I can find it – but there were non-British women too on my playlist. St Vincent is the stage name of Annie Clark, a 26-year-old Oklahoma native, who debuted with her first album, *Marry Me*, in 1992. Well, I haven't heard *Marry Me*, but I just heard her soon-to-be-released second album,

when even before it is formally released, NPR's website ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)) streamed it in its entirety for a preview. Annie Clark, I learnt, began her career playing guitar for The Polyphonic Spree, a band that comprises as many as 30 musicians, and Sufjan Stevens, the alternative pop star. *Actor* is an album with sophisticated sound and elaborate arrangements with help from well-known musicians from bands that Clark has played with. It does help too that Clark has a great voice.

I heard many more women last week. I rediscovered Feist, the Canadian singer who remarkably reinvented herself after losing her voice early in her career. I heard a concert recording by Kaki King, a gifted guitarist and songwriter, and discovered a young New Yorker, Nellie McKay, whose songs are witty, powerful and politically charged. Sadly, there's not much space left to talk too much about them. Happy downloading and see you next week!

(To stream or download the music mentioned in this column, go to [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com). And send feedback to [downloadctrl@gmail.com](mailto:downloadctrl@gmail.com))