

## White Chalk

### PJ Harvey

The undisputed queen of British alt-rock is back with her eighth studio album and first new material since 2004's *Uh Huh Her*. *White Chalk* is a drastically different sounding record; replacing the blues rock guitar and siren screech is an ethereal world of piano, harp and frail, with almost childlike vocals.

Opening track 'The Devil' has a strong tick-tock piano rhythm and a soft, high verse melody. A full-bodied chorus implores us to "Come on, come on, come on here at once" before dropping to a suspenseful whisper. 'Dear Darkness' is gentle and introverted with a military drum beat dropping in and out in the background and some ghostly backing vocals. 'Grow Grow Grow' is full of horror movie suspense as a young woman attempts to make sense of love and romance: "Teach me Mummy / How to grow / How to catch someone's fancy / Underneath the twisted old grove" she keens in a wavering falsetto surrounded by stately piano, fluttering harp and mediaeval acoustic guitar.



'When Under Ether' has a simple but hypnotic melody punctuated by odd keyboard loops. Like most of the songs on this album it doesn't follow the pop song structures we're used to, acting more as a storytelling medium and a mood piece than a simple verse - bridge - chorus affair. Title track 'White Chalk' transmits a mysterious echoing vocal, telling tales of a childhood spent in the West Country walking over the white chalk hills. References to pregnancy and abortion may or may not be autobiographical or even literal, but lines like "Dorset's cliffs lead to the sea / Where I walked our unborn child in me" and "Scratch my palms, there's blood on my hands" brim with bitter sadness.

'Broken Harp' is short and bittersweet with Bjork-esque repeating melodies and delicate accompaniment, while 'Silence' pulses intently with insistent piano chords and yet more regretful lyrics: "I freed myself from family / I freed myself from work / I freed myself, I freed myself / And remained alone". 'The Piano' is intense and full of anguish, a sideways look at the instrument who gets "her teeth smashed in" by hammers with poignant flashback memories of family arguments adding more flavour. 'The Mountain' closes the album with a spooky vocal and spread-out piano chords that crescendo until the music threatens to engulf Harvey's plaintive wail completely.

Family connections, loss, regret and loneliness seem to be the overriding themes throughout 'White Chalk'. Polly Jean Harvey's lyrics have never been easy to penetrate and it would be lazy to suggest that there is anything but partial autobiographical truth in the words contained in this album, though she occupies her characters totally. Her ability to create worlds within songs has always made her very special and though her shift in style seems drastic at first, when you allow yourself to be submerged in *White Chalk's* old fashioned beauty it all starts to make perfect sense.



#### Track Listing

1. The Devil
2. Dear Darkness
3. Grow Grow Grow
4. When Under Ether
5. White Chalk
6. Broken Harp
7. Silence
8. To Talk To You
9. The Piano
10. Before Departure


## 11. The Mountain

*Try this if you like:* Nick Cave, Kate Bush, Bjork

*Laura Kidd*

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