

# ENDING AT THE BEGINNING

Classic debut captures the controversial Phair at her unpolished finest **BY JESSICA SUAREZ**

## LIZ PHAIR

*Exile In Guyville* **ATO**

**I**f we didn't know in 1993 that *Exile In Guyville* was going to be Liz Phair's best record, we know it now. Her musical mistakes—and occasional flashes of slick pop genius—that speckle the years since *Exile In Guyville's* release have overshadowed its prescience. But in a way, she was always going backward: singing about domestic bliss before she was married, writing "Divorce Song" before getting divorced, and apologizing for the disparate aspects of her personality a decade before she presented them to us.

Phair embodied the willful, defiant amateurism of early-'90s alt-rock so well that she never even realized it, as removed from that world as she was. After Phair recorded some of *Guyville's* first tracks under the name Girly Sound, producer Brad Wood recommended she talk to Matador Records, whose owner,



Gerard Cosloy, was eager to sign her. But to tack an "ism" onto Phair's "amateur" status misrepresents the case. Her sing-speak and

loose strumming isn't a statement, it's a lack of technique. Her tuneless vocals are a fine parallel to *Guyville's* simple non-melodies and arrangements, but they're hardly studied. Phair claimed the album was a song-by-song response to *Exile On Main St.*, but the evidence is as hollow as her guitar chords. In some ways, she's grown as a musician since then, but the growth seems to have obscured whatever raw talent *Guyville's* sparseness revealed.

For every song about fucking, there's one about getting fucked. Much has been made of Phair's profanity, though she utters the f-word just over a dozen times. More fascinating are songs such as "Flower," its dual lead vocals

(sung alternately in a falsetto and monotone groan) include, "You're probably shy and introspective / That's not part of my objective," next to some well-placed f-bombs. She sings about love and self-doubt just as often, but she tames these heartaches by rendering them anonymous, whether they're "Johnny Sunshine" or "Soap Star Joe." Her selfishness in telling her side of the story offered the flip side to the male-dominated indie-rock world, which was, for her, contained inside the male-dominated indie-rock universe of Chicago.

Though this reissue has been remastered and includes a handful of bonus tracks, it's the companion DVD that will get the most

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attention. Phair interviews Matador label heads Cosloy and Chris Lombardi, as well as Chicago's Urge Overkill, producer Wood, John Cusack and former nemesis Steve Albini.

Phair warned us what was coming. On "Fuck and Run," she said she'd be alone forever, then got divorced. She wanted "all that stupid old shit / like letters and sodas," then, on 2003's *Liz Phair*, she sang like a teenager waiting for a note in her locker. *Guyville's* "Help Me, Mary," sums up indie rock's carefully guarded outsider status: She felt out of place then; she sounds out of place now, too. But *Guyville* reminds us that Phair could be great, even when she wasn't all that good. Another act may be coming for her. This re-release on her new, once again indie, label precedes a new LP out later this year. The coming record might be another regression for Phair, part of a career going backwards. If so, at least we know the career ends brilliantly, with its debut.

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Photo by Tom Maday