

Citizen Swift

Ember Swift shares the message of global citizenry through music. **By Emelina Minero**



Canadian musician, songwriter and activist Ember Swift has been in the music game for nearly all her life. She began writing songs at 9, performing at 10 and in 1996 she released her first album. And while Swift started out as an angst-driven acoustic folk artist, her music can no longer be boxed into a single genre. Over the past 16 years it has evolved, taking inspiration from jazz, electronica, rock, funk, folk-rock, pop, reggae and world music.

Currently living in Beijing, China, Swift's passion for peaceful global relations is hugely influential to her music. Her recent offering, *11:11*, is a bilingual album written in both Mandarin and English, with songs about the environmental challenges China faces today. In keeping with her global mission, her group, The Beijing Band, is made up of members hailing from Australia, East Africa, China and Canada. Swift believes in the power of music to bring awareness to important issues and to unite people from across the planet.

Why is music such a powerful medium?

Music is a cross-cultural language. Anywhere you are in the world, you can use it to communicate with people. There's so much more conveyed through music than just what's written in the lyrics, so it transcends language differences and becomes the ultimate unifying language in and of itself. Music has enormous power to unite people.

What role does activism play in your music?

My earlier work was more vocal politically, but my current work is more political than anything I've ever done. That's because I live and work out of Beijing, China now and I'm a foreigner in a foreign land interested in cross-cultural communication and understanding. The very existence of my bilingual *11:11* album is a political statement. To my knowledge, there's no other foreign artist singing in Mandarin about pertinent environmental issues, for example, here at this time. As an overall album, it communicates that we can all coexist.

In a time when China is the rising power,

there's bound to be fear and competition emerging, which are both divisive elements in terms of global relations. Maybe this music can be a tool towards harmony instead.

What other causes are close to your heart?

I'm also really interested in environmental issues, particularly water conservation and protection. Finally, I'd say human rights issues related to women and children, poverty and sexual orientation are all enormously important.

How has your bilingual album been received in China?

As I live in Beijing now, having a body of work that includes lyrics in Mandarin was vital to my ability to perform for Chinese audiences. Music can transcend spoken language, but when you're part of a community and suddenly speaking as a resident of a city in which you are performing regularly and seeking listeners, it's important to be able to speak in the language of the land, out of cultural respect!

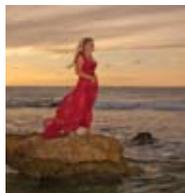
I really wanted to build a collection of songs that could have their "twin versions" in either language so that when touring in North America or Australia I could swap them back to English and have them as easily understood there as they are here in China.

So far, it's been enormously helpful for gathering Chinese-speaking fans. I was on the Chinese rock charts this past fall for six solid weeks with one of my songs! I was told that I was the first foreigner to ever be on those charts!

How has motherhood influenced your music career?

I know I won't do much touring in the first year of her life and I feel quite fine with that. I have trekked all over the place for many, many years and it's OK to mostly stay put while I enjoy her infancy. What's more, she's the most amazing thing that I've ever made—far more interesting than all of my 11 albums put together—so I don't feel like I have to make a decision right now. I'm just taking things one-step at a time. (emberswift.com) ■

Hot Licks By Rachel Shatto



Deborah Vial
Stages and Stones
(Lavendar Lung Music)

Openly lesbian rocker Deborah Vial took the scenic route to a solo career. The Dallas native went directly from college to performing overseas for the troops, a journey that took her from Croatia to Iceland to the Korean DMZ then back to Dallas and finally, with her partner and music label owner Caron Barrett, to Maui. Now Vial is lending her rich and husky vocals to *Stages and Stones*, a rock album with no shortage of attitude and a bit of edge. Standout track "Don't Make Me Take It" is an edgy and rocking anthem full of pounding drums and grinding guitars. Fans of Christine Martucci and Melissa Etheridge will find plenty to sink their teeth into with *Stages and Stones*. Keep an eye on Vial as she continues to make waves in the lesbian rock scene.



Girlyman
Supernova
(Fine Feathered Music)

For the uninitiated, queer quartet Girlyman is a collaboration by Ty Greenstein, Nate Borofsky, Doris Muramatsu and her partner (and former Po Girl alum) JJ Jones on the drums. The band describes themselves as "harmony-driven gender pop" which translates to wonderfully gimmick-free folk-infused pop created by the sonic synergy of expertly merging and overlapping rich harmonies. The result is a sunny balm for your eardrums. The upbeat yet cynical love song "No Matter What I Do" is sincere without being sappy and the ennuï-laden album opener "Nothing Left" conveys heartbreak without leaving listeners emotionally bereft. Despite frequently drawing inspiration from heartache, the vim and vigor of the tempo and vocals translates the pain into a 13-track feel-good album.



Me of a Kind
You Are Here
(Rampage Productions)

There is something comfortably familiar about *You Are Here*. Maybe it's the blending '90s Goth and trip hop with hints of ska that strikes a cord with this child of the '90s reviewer. Or perhaps it's just that the talent behind this album—former drummer of the seminal queercore band Tribe 8, Jen Schwartz—has a gift for creating music that resonates with queer audiences. Either way, *Me of a Kind*, which pairs Schwartz with Becky Gebhardt of Raining Jane and Valerie Stern of Layla Lane, is just the auditory treat to satisfy your nostalgic appetite. "The Rain" is an orchestral and percussion-heavy track that's pleasantly atmospheric and moody and "The Last Time" is part New Age serenade and part glam rock ballad. While it may not be as overtly political as Tribe 8, *Me of a Kind* is not short on edge.



Nneka
Soul is Heavy
(Decon Records)

You should take Nneka very seriously because she is a serious talent. This Nigerian hip hop artist draws inspiration from the political corruption in her home country and her musical influences from reggae, hip-hop, modern R&B and vintage soul, all of which are very fitting platforms for her confrontational and deeply introspective messages. "My Home" is a stellar brass-heavy anthem and "Lucifer" is an easy, breezy reggae jam. Her breathy, urgent voice and lyrics are so heartfelt and raw they give listeners the sense that it's not just her talent on display but her (heavy) soul. She has rightfully drawn comparisons to Lauryn Hill and Erykah Badu. However, with her latest album, Nneka may have left her contemporaries behind. It's brilliant, unapologetically experimental and yet *Soul is Heavy* somehow remains accessible.