

# An Orbit of Her Own

## Hired Cello Caroline Lavelle Launches A Solo Singer/Songwriter Career With Plenty of Spirit

by Rebecca Kraus

Caroline Lavelle's musical emphasis has changed of late. The English musician, a classically trained cellist who has worked with Massive Attack, Peter Gabriel, the Cranberries and the Waterboys, doesn't really have much time to practice her instrument these days. She is too busy supporting her solo debut, which elegantly casts her in the realm of singer/songwriter.

*Spirit*, the ethereal and richly textured album, is trip-hop crashing down on New Age, resulting in Space Age textures. Tricky meets the Chieftains and Brian Eno. It is an album which highlights Lavelle's vocal talent as well as her string arrangements. An album which extracts her musi-

cal background and freshly and crisply puts it on its own plane. With the help of producer William Orbit, *Spirit* weaves fluttering vocals with dark cello lines and synthetic musings. Lavelle says about her new direction, "Now, the cello is incidental to the fact that I sing, so the emphasis has shifted, but I still practice and I can't wait till Wimbledon!"

Cello playing. Wimbledon. There is actually a correlation, and it illuminates a rather unorthodox ritual Lavelle performs for the love of sport and music.

"Every Wimbledon, I put the television on and bring it into the studio, [and] for two weeks, I sit and play the cello solidly, she says. While rooting for Agassi, she practices her

craft, never once getting the inkling to pick up, say, her own racket. "I'm absolutely rubbish at tennis," Lavelle admits. "I can't hit the ball to save my life!"

And so doth this artist hone her skills. Once you sit down and share a morning chat with Caroline Lavelle, none of this seems the least bit odd. It just adds to the endearing qualities of a woman whose own self-deprecation delightfully contrasts with the boldness of her album. Unlike most others in her rank, she is as just as interested in the ambiance of her album as she is in the constellations. She is more likely to go for a walk with her dog in Sussex in southern England than she is to check out the latest rage in London clubs. Lavelle



Lavelle: house of the spirit

may not respect trends and the “coolness” of her collaborations, but she may very well be at the forefront of a new one. And this is what makes her music, and her person all the more refreshing.

*Spirit* is a rich, emotional album, too, largely because of the impeccable production methods. It's a good thing William Orbit, known ambience master, found Lavelle and signed her to his N-Gram label, distributed in the United States by Discovery Records. The result is compelling, disquieting and peaceful. But it is never complacent – Lavelle's own personality and insights see to that. While she might owe some gratitude to the musicians whom she has supported, she never tries to emulate any of them, sticking to her own influences and stories. Joni Mitchell's song “A Case of View” receives a lovely, techno-friendly rendition here. On “Dreams of Picasso,” she sings about a recurring dream where she would cross a river in the middle of a room to embrace a friend who had recently died in real life. At the same time this emotionally wrenching dream was recurring, Lavelle was homeless and knew of a big, huge empty house where Picasso used to stay. The two images merge seamlessly in “Dreams,” and even with all the personal references, the drive and pulsating groove give the song both an otherworldly and accessible feel. The track aptly illustrates Lavelle's ap-

proach to songwriting: “It's very difficult to not cheapen such an enormous emotion, to sound really sugary and sort of raw, so the way I did it was oblique,” she says. “I don't really write songs for others. I'm not a craftsman in that I can write a song for another person. I write a song for me to like, and so if someone else likes it, then that's really good, and I hope they do.”

From the sounds of things, Lavelle needn't worry about being liked. Her album is getting much critical acclaim and her recent debut performance at L.A.'s LunaPark went remarkably well. There, in March, she performed alongside a string quartet and percussionist to a full house. Starting a cappella, she had the room silenced with anticipation and appreciation. She gloats with gratitude: “They were the nicest audience you could have ever, ever wanted – it was just fantastic.” The gig at LunaPark is just the beginning, mind you. She is slated to come back to the States in late spring, 1996, to perform around the country and to work on another, edgier album later in the year.

In between touring and recording, Lavelle the artist becomes Lavelle the homebody, though the two are closely related. To see her speak about her rural world is to see her mind reel with delight, and in essence to see just what it is that has become her M.O.

Lavelle lives in a splendid, rich house, centuries old in rural England, not far from where famous British battles were fought. She insists the house is very much a living entity which has embraced her presence just as she has embraced its solitude, and listening to *Spirit* is to catch a glimpse of her private world.

Rather than watching the charts or listening to the radio, Lavelle spends her time training dogs (her own), following astronomy, collecting butterflies and being an avid nature lover. “You know, I think it's really important that musicians are not just musicians, because it's fairly boring; you become fairly limited after a while, so I do tons of other things as well.” Her eyes light up as she exhales the adulation of her surroundings: “It's a brilliant place to live, because I live on the side of this hill where you can see for miles.”

She may cite David Bowie, Talk Talk and Elastica as musical muses, but the clouds and winds of the countryside appear to be of equal inspiration. “I think because I'm so solitary and I don't go to clubs, I think that's why my album has turned out to be... sort of unclassifiable,” she says. With a concerted effort to sound unique, Lavelle has essentially circumvented easy descriptions or references. “If I think anything sounds like anything else, I tend to ditch it because I want it to sound like me.” Being unique then ends up being a double-edged musical sword. “It's a bit difficult for radio stations to sort of put [*Spirit*] into their playlists, and yet it's actually crossing over to different formats.”

Besides the luminous sounds on the album, Lavelle's credits are also noteworthy. After training at the Royal College of Music and working with Siouxsie and the Banshees, she supported Dee Danann, an Irish ensemble for many years. It was her cello playing on a track with Massive Attack that caused both Peter Gabriel and William Orbit to take notice. And now that collaboration with such luminaries has taken a backseat to her own projects, she is exploring her own style of singing and songwriting. “Voice lessons made my voice go a bit pure and choirboy-ish, which I hate. So I stopped that, and [since] I started smoking again for a while, my voice went back to normal,” she confesses with a chuckle. Likewise, her approach to penning lyrics and music is hardly standard.

“Each song is quite different, so what I tend to do, because I'm so limited on the keyboards, I tend to write actually on the keyboards, which makes me have to think about it. Every time I do a song, it's a different sort of route into it. It might start with a bass line, it might start with a drums and chord, it might start with a melody or a lyrical. It rarely starts with the cello, very rarely – it's odd, because the cello's such an odd instrument to try to write a song around.”

But, according to Lavelle, a wonderful accompaniment to a game of tennis. **51**