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Although *Exile in Guyville* was celebrated as one of the year's top records by *Spin* and the *New York Times*, it was also, to some, an abomination: a mockery of the Rolling Stones' most revered record and a rare glimpse into the psyche of a shrewd, independent, strong young woman. For these crimes, Liz Phair was run out of her hometown of Chicago, enduring a flame war perpetrated by writers who accused her of being boring, inauthentic, and even a poor musician.

With *Exile in Guyville*, Phair spoke for all the girls who loved the world of indie rock but felt deeply unwelcome there. Like all great works of art, *Exile* was a harbinger of the shape of things to come: Phair may have undermined the male ego, but she also unleashed a new female one. For the sake of all the female artists who have benefited from her work—from Lena Dunham to Lana Del Rey and back again—it's high time we go back to Guyville.

Liz Phair's Exile in Guyville Details

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From Reader Review Liz Phair's Exile in Guyville for online ebook

Elliot Chalom says

Disclaimer: This is a review of an Advanced Readers Copy of Liz Phair's Exile in Guyville by Gina Arnold.

In her volume on Liz Phair's controversial 1993 debut album *Exile in Guyville*, Gina Arnold takes the 33-1/3 series in a direction I haven't seen before. She is a super-fan for sure, but her analysis of the album comes from a place of intellectual curiosity, rather than mere music appreciation. It is an academic piece about a record that didn't sell very well but whose cultural impact was significant. In taking on that daunting task I think that Arnold did a fantastic job.

First, it's important to say what *Exile in Guyville* (the book) isn't about. Though Arnold defends Phair's musicianship, she doesn't make the argument that this is the greatest piece of music of the '90s or anything like that. Though she acknowledges the changing of the way that strong female musicians are currently received, she doesn't go out of her way to lionize Phair as a trailblazer, someone in whose footsteps today's female acts followed. Nor does she take us through the nuts and bolts of *Guyville*, deconstructing each song line by line, chord by chord, as many of the 33-1/3 books (pleasantly) do. Other than brief comparisons of each song on *Guyville* to its companion song on the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main St.*, the songs themselves are mainly ignored. Arnold discusses the record in great detail without ever really getting into the music.

And this actually makes a lot of sense. As the oft-repeated quote goes, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." Or, as Arnold says very early in the book, setting up the reader for what's to come: "I recall a sage warning my [former] editor gave to me. 'People like to do drugs, not read about doing drugs. ... And the same thing goes for music.'" "So," she shortly thereafter adds, "herein I take up my pen in a different spirit altogether. Rather than address the brilliance of a particular song or chord sequence, rather than argue for the genius of singer and songwriter Liz Phair, I want to address the milieu that her work came from – the titular *Guyville*, the people who lived there, their values, their hopes ... and the culture of the twentieth century. I want to consider all the ways that the past was a different country, and the way that, back in that strange nation, we record buyers and music lovers were shaped and changed by a particular moment in history, a moment that the double album *Exile in Guyville* responded to so eloquently."

This is what Gina Arnold's *Exile in Guyville* is all about. It's obvious that the impact of the record wasn't really a musical one; by that token, anyone (including Arnold herself) would agree that *Exile on Main St.*, not to mention countless other albums, dwarf *Guyville*. No, the impact was a cultural one, one that did for women in indie rock what an album like Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* did for race relations in New York City in the early 1990s. Neither *Guyville* nor *Fear of a Black Planet* is the defining last word in the conversation – instead each brought the conversation that was brewing underneath to a head. These were statement records. But to be a statement you can't just say something controversial – you also have to be a damn good record. Arnold makes this point eloquently, then lets it stand on its own merit. You either believe her that *Guyville* is a great record worth discussing or you don't.

The thing about writing an academic piece is that it's a much tougher task than writing a piece of music criticism. It's easy to say why you love [insert your favorite album here]. I happen to think that the many of the authors of the 33-1/3 books do a particularly good job of it, but at the end of the day these are mostly opinion pieces, where it's hard to be too far off. Not so when taking the approach that Arnold did with her book. Writing at length about two themes – "third-wave feminism" and the changing nature of indie music over the past twenty years - requires laborious research, cogent arguments, and logical grounding from start to finish. Doing so in the context of one record makes the task even more difficult. I can say, having reviewed many scholarly articles in my time, that Arnold passes the test with flying colors. The book is well

cited, filled (but not overwrought) with pertinent facts, and her points are structured in a way that just make sense. In a word, the book is smart.

Before I read *Exile in Guyville* I really liked this record. I had a sense for the importance of it – no indie fan who was around in the '90s couldn't – but I couldn't have put all of the pieces together the way Arnold did. I'm not sure that it achieved the goal that the best of these books do for me – that is, make me like the album more – but it does something more important than that. Arnold contends that “this record rivals its forebear *Exile on Main St.* in the beauty of its sonics and the perfect articulation of its artistic vision.” She then proves this convincingly in her book. *Guyville* (the book) had me thinking critically about *Exile in Guyville* as a piece of art. As a thinking man's music fan, with a special place in my heart for the alternative '90s, I couldn't ask for more.

Read my (even more detailed) review and others at <http://www.2bitmonkey.com>

S M-B says

The weakest part of this book is the track by track comparison of *Exile in Guyville* with *Exile on Main Street* - and I say that while also confessing to have never (knowingly) listened to *Exile on Main Street*; the arguments are simply too forced to be either convincing or, i'm afraid, interesting. Whatever the relationship between Liz Phair's brilliantly developed project and the Rolling Stones album it is clearly not a commentary on each track and to treat it as such is to attribute to Liz Phair a cleverness she is far too clever to have bothered with. It is easy to see why the track by track comparison might be tempting but - once written - it should have been cut as a failed experiment. That said, I found Gina Arnold's device of locating her writing of the book in the Gangnam neighbourhood Starbucks to be a very effective reminder that the 90s was pre-internet and pre-a-lot-of-the-things-it-is-easy-to-forget-about-the-music-industry-post-internet. Principally, that means downloading and the way that has altered the income streams that flow from recorded music versus live performances. It is in this conjuncture that she has much of interest to say in contrasting the Stones (apparently very popular for their live performances, if you go for that sort of thing) and Liz Phair's outsider subversion of rock bombast. It is a great reminder of how cheeky and how powerful was Liz Phair's intervention.

Charles says

When I learned Bloomsbury had signed Gina Arnold, a notorious indie-rock puritan (and lackluster scribe), to write the 33 1/3 on *Guyville*, I shuddered. But after laudatory early reviews, and in light of my longstanding *Guyville* fandom, I decided to give Arnold a chance. Perhaps she had grown or matured since her judgmental and clueless early 90's writings. No such luck. Instead, she writes like someone who took a couple rote Cultural Studies courses, and swallowed those doctrines wholesale. Thus, she celebrates Phair's subversive achievement by quoting such rigid reactionaries as Nietzsche, Laura Mulvey, and Allan Bloom. She projects her own anti-Stones invective onto Phair, searching for middle fingers but finding only thumbs, as she rushes through an unconvincing (and sometimes hilariously forced) side-by-side comparison of *Exile in Guyville* and *Exile on Main Street*. Perhaps, worst of all, she overstates the Internet's role in undermining the *Guyville* state of mind (has she even viewed any indie rock message boards in the past decade, to say nothing of non-music spaces like comics and sci fi?), while dismissing post-Britney female pop's role in doing the same. Add to that the grammatical, factual, and chronological (how in the hell could Phair cover

"No More Drama" or a *Miseducation* cut in 1993?!?!?) errors that have plagued too many recent 33 1/3's (we miss you, David Barker), and this adds up to a shoddy, inept study of a brilliant work --- a B- Intro to Popular Culture paper, a D- book. Arnold managed to dash even my very low expectations.

Christopher says

So it is saved for posterity: on page 38 of my ARC, after continuous noodling (to call any of the discursive, jumbled and oft-nonsensical word salad in this book "riffing" is a grave insult, doubly so in a book and series about rock music) on the theme of Phair's threatening the nu-boys club of early nineties indie rock, Arnold makes one of the all-time worst analogies I have ever read:

"In short, Phair was the indie rock equivalent of Frantz Fanon, exposing the state of a colonized people living under the subjugation of an outdated and tendentious ideology. By making her record a cheeky mockery of the Rolling Stones' worshiped LP, she managed to dismantle the master's house by using the master's tools."

I have to hand it to her; if I wanted to insult Frantz Fanon, Algerians, colonized populations, radical feminists, anyone who ever had to deal with being slighted or harassed for being a woman who dared to pick up a guitar, anyone who has ever been expected to be attractive window dressing/jism-jars for the men in the indie-rock scene, and finally, Liz Phair herself, then I can think of nothing better than these two sentences. If only it insulted the Rolling Stones as harshly as she thought it would. (The Rolling Stones who, of late, have grossed \$120 million on their current world tour fifty years after their founding. You know: dismantled.)

I'd like to make extremely clear to what I'm objecting. It is not the the notion that the indie-rock world was male-dominated and hostile to women who wanted to use the subject of their femininity in song. It was. It is not the notion that women, even in the wealthiest country in the world, even those in such a bourgeois thing as indie rock, are subjects of oppression. They are. It is not the notion, which Arnold fails to adequately convey despite ample evidence, that Phair was able to make clever, trenchant, and even deconstructionist commentary about said boys' club and living as a targeted minority despite making 51% of the population. (This album rules, and was a serious and dare-I-say IMPORTANT high school favorite of mine, which explains why this misfire has me reaching for my dusty rock-critic soap box.)

I object, obviously, to the moral equivalency of the Steve Albini/Touch-and-Go scene and fucking Western colonialism, which, for one thing, has a large body count. Something else that strikes me, though, is Arnold's contention, 20+ years after Nevermind, that "we won." That the master's house was at all dented, much less destroyed. Whether this is about the male-centric indie scene or major label omniscience, this is plainly false. Examples of Arnold's misjudgment abound; freshest in my mind is when, toward the end of the book, she posits that Lana Del Rey's commercial success is a triumph of art over misplaced critical backlash - this after the catastrophe of her SNL debut, of which she enthuses that "[LDR was] clad in a skintight white gown that would make ninety-nine percent of the female population of the planet look chubby (*Christopher's note: cool insight.*)" That LDR had the entire Interscope machine behind her goes unmentioned, probably because it clashes with this notion, like The Oatmeal with a Ph.D, that the dinosaur bleeding out has lead to more opportunities for smaller bands, rather than an unholy consolidation of power in the major labels and savvy tech-companies leading to more artists fighting for smaller pieces of a dwindling pie. She argues, with a straight face, "in the 20th century, what was popular was decided by a handful of humans [...] going about seeing that the music was marketed and distributed." As opposed to now.

Fuck, this book pisses me off. Listen, I have a Spotify account. It's a service I pay for and enjoy. I also pay for and enjoy the \$1 cookies at the Wal-Greens down the street, but I'm not fucking suggesting we're ten seconds away from solving world hunger.

This baffling critical theory is balanced by many easily-checked factual errors. I'm still not entirely convinced these were thrown in as evidence of her carelessness or done to fuck with me, white dude who knows too much about music ("actually, there's no 'The,' it's just 'Urge Overkill,'"") but one instance amused me no end. Page 86:

"If (she) had been really scrupulous about her project's supposed use of *Exile on Main St*, then it would have had (two) faithful cover(s), preferably of something fairly contemporary, African American and 'authentic;' (*Christopher's note: I understand this is mocking the Stones for their self-conscious authentic cache, rather than suggesting it as a good idea. Don't worry, the whopper is coming*) maybe something by NWA or the Wu-Tang Clan; maybe something from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, or Mary J. Blige's 'No More Drama.'"

Exile in Guyville would surely have had a much bigger impact if it contained any of those, besides NWA. *Enter the 36 Chambers* was still five months away from release; Lauryn Hill's album was six years away from conception and completion, before which she would have to release two albums with The motherfucking Fugees; most impressively, "No More Drama" was a whole other millennium away in 2001. If Phair's record had contained these songs, we would have exploited her time-travelling abilities to stop World War II and build plutonium icons of her in our hover-booties. It would be a fucking achievement a year after the *Girlysound* tapes (a subject not addressed at any length in this volume).

Man alive. You know, stream-of-consciousness writing is actually very easy; it's turning those thoughts into a book you want to read that's the hard part. Arnold is too credulous to declare that "Guyville," the mental geography that was Phair's shorthand for the tackier side of the Daydream Nation of the early nineties, is dead. But as her memories make clear (as nothing else is in this volume), she is less referring to Wicker Park/Chicago c.1993, but her own youth. The book's final sentences would have us believe that she's bidding adieu to that part of her life and psyche. But wishing for something, no matter how fervently, is not enough to make it true, from shaking your past (or recapturing it) to Lana Del Rey's sales being evidence that the machine is dying. I'm a fan of the series and was thrilled to receive this and other titles to review for my job at a book shop, but I can't, in good conscience, recommend this title at all, and I don't look forward to talking to my rep about it.

John Norman says

This is not the book on Liz Phair you've been waiting for. I was hoping for more. I loved Arnold's early book *Route 666* and saw how weak her subsequent tome was (*Kiss This*). I'm been rooting for her to make a triumphant return to rock writing, but . . . this ain't it.

Arnold's book puzzles over the fact that the mainstream had nothing for Liz Phair despite the obvious merits of the album. She interrogates the way the male critics of the early 1990s exhibited various forms of misogyny in their reviews. Fair enough (though this is shooting fish in a barrel).

But she has no (zero) sensitivity to all of the men who just loved *Exile in Guyville* from the first moment they heard it. This is important, because just as Liz Phair's album didn't get its due, her male audience never got its due. There has always been a cadre of male listeners who always loved the Au Pairs, Pylon, and countless other bands that twisted and distorted the normative narratives of sex, gender, and rock and roll. The problem with Gina Arnold is that she implies that "*Exile in Guyville*" is somehow comparable to "*Exile on Main Street*" (like this is all the same game, the same rock culture). Arnold is a person who actually went to see the Rolling Stones live in the 90s. By a certain standard, she's already compromised, and making an argument that is, at the start, untenable and boring.

Meanwhile, the book is littered with little problems that undermine her message. She refers to Urge Overkill as The Urge Overkill (what?); she talks about the male/female vocal games of certain 90s bands and includes the Chills (really?); she calls the Replacements a 90s band (they broke up in 1991). She refers to the critic Allan Bloom as "Allen" Bloom. Most disconcerting, she seems to take at face value the idea that somehow "Exile in Guyville" really is a reply album to "Exile on Main Street." By trying out this critical strategy, she shows that she can't recognize Liz Phair's wit and irony. There is some kind of entanglement between the albums, but it isn't song by song -- it's more of a clash of world views, distributed unevenly across 36 songs.

Arnold now has a PhD from Stanford, but her theoretical armature doesn't get much past the 90s. Can't we get past the quotations from, say, Teresa DeLauretis (misspelled on p. 28).

Having said all that, there are some good bits: She's good on the gentrification of neighborhoods like Wicker Park . . . She makes some good connections around certain songs (like "Dance of the Seven Veils").

But in the end, I don't think there's much here.

Someday there is going to be a great book about Liz Phair. Here are some of the things it's going to do:

It's going to be historical, i.e., stories about the 90s.

It's going to be loaded with interviews (w/ Liz, w/ Albini, w/ the Smashing Pumpkins, Urge Overkill, people who knew Material Issue) . . .

It's going to be very good on the differences between the 80s/90s, and the 90s/2000s. In other words, it's not going to just use our present to talk about a certain past.

It's going to have some things to say about Liz's later albums.

And, above all, it's going to drop the pretense of generalization, and start from the concrete experience of everyone who knew at the time that Liz Phair had emitted a great album.

Aengus says

There's a reason she was known as Gina "I'm Writing as Bad as I Can" Arnold. While she makes some valid points ("Indie rock guys are sexist!!"), most of the book reads like Greil Marcus lite., or a grad student's rhetoric paper. There are lots of quotes from obscure Marxist scholars, and references to "the Gaze" (a sure sign someone doesn't know what the fuck he or she is talking about). "Exile in Guyville" starts with a long winded story about coffee shops in Seoul, degenerate into the aforementioned dissertation, and almost recovers in the last 30 pages of the book, when she finally analyzes the record. As an extra bonus, Ms . Arnold misuses the word "literally" twice. Literally. Vies with John Darnielle's "Master of Reality" as the worst book in the 33 1/3 series.

J.J. Lair says

I wondered if the author listened to the album while reading the beginning of the book. It seemed like she had these essays on music and how musicians images are made. Then she retro-fitted the album into her thesis. She sprinkles in how the album was not favorably reviewed. It actually made me dislike the album. By around 50% of the book, the tone changes. She examines the album song by song to it's often compared partner "Exile on Main Street" by the Rolling Stones. The review is very well done. The book closes with an examination on how modern woman are presented and how we look for tastemakers in music. The last half

of the book makes the purchase worthwhile.

Susanna says

Wow, people are harsh on this book, and most of these readers seem to focus on two things: (1) The atrocious copyediting [which drove me crazy, too!] and (2) It wasn't about the making of the album. I have had this book on my nightstand for years and finally read it this week. I enjoyed it a lot, especially the review from 20 years on of the male-dominated world that *Exile in Guyville* released into. I'm biased by sharing many of Arnold's views about this album and the Stones, but I appreciated being reminded of who I was when I got this album and what it meant to me vs. what happened to the record as time passed.

Water says

This is not a book about Liz Phair or *Exile in Guyville*.

Elizabeth says

To set this up much like the author does, this was one of those albums that was with me in college, dubbed for me by a friend onto cassette. It is one that I listened to hundreds of times during a few year in college / mid 90's. I was interested in seeing what kind of place *Exile in Guyville* had earned itself over the decades and take a nostalgic trip down memory lane.

What I got was a ton of context for the album, much of which I found very interesting looking back from higher ground. Some of it I understood at the time, some of it makes more sense looking back with more life experience and a wider interest in the machinations of culture. Some of the book takes on an academic intensity which was a bit much for me, but others may enjoy.

When the book finally got to the actual content of the album, it felt a little flat. I was hoping for a bit more insight on some of the songs, but maybe its better this way. My original impressions are left largely undisturbed. Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone who encountered this album in the 90's or who has interest in the music industry at that time.

sarah says

Man. I *really wanted* to be able to say good things about this book. I love Liz Phair. I'm a feminist. I'm a critical thinker. This book, which is less a making-of retrospective than an argument focused on the inherent patriarchy of the 90s indie rock scene, seen through Phair's role and refutation of said patriarchy, seemed tailor made for me. So what's the problem?

Where to start? The copy editing is ghastly, but not Arnold's fault (you can do better Bloomsbury!). Arnold spends upward of twenty pages discussing the homogeneity of Starbucks in Korea, likening it to Phair's mythical Guyville, which I find to be more than a stretch. She makes arguably false statements, claiming that interest in vinyl is on the wane, when countless articles have been published lauding the comeback of the LP.

She apparently thinks Mercury Rev is a British band. She claims that Kim Gordon "showed no interest in her appearance," ignoring the fact that Gordon founded a fashion label (X-Girl). She completely ignores the existence of college radio. Her claim that Exile in Guyville suffered low sales due to Phair's inexperience playing live is one I've heard before, but she offers no concrete proof to back it up. She feels compelled to define the term "A&R" but has no trouble tossing out theoretical jargon like doxa with no explanation. She spends another 10 pages explaining why she, personally, hates the Rolling Stones, yet only uses a handful of quotes from Phair, WHO MADE THE ALBUM, and the quotes come from a scanty 3-4 interview sources at that.

Her entire book is a feminist discourse on the heteronormative, conservative reality behind the well-meaning, DIY "alternative" to grossly chauvinist hair metal that was (is?) the indie-rock scene, but she completely neglects mentioning the existence/reception of contemporary (albeit controversial) indie feminist figureheads like Lisa Carver of Rollerderby, Kathleen Hanna, and Courtney Love. I think Arnold's argument is incredibly interesting, but in reading this volume, I feel like she ultimately took the easy way out and made it more about herself than her experience listening to the album, or any collective audience listening to the album, or, simply, the album. That, coupled with her insistence on either completely eliding, misrepresenting, and/or shoehorning facts into her argument, willy-nilly, as she sees fit, makes me distrustful of her as a critic, and disappointed in the book as a whole.

Jodi says

It is impossible for me to overstate the importance of Liz Phair's "Exile in Guyville" to me. The music on that album is as much a part of me as my rib cage or my memories of junior high. It is a piece of art I have used to be build the very foundation of who I think I am. When people don't like or don't understand or just never heard of "Exile in Guyville" what I actually hear from them is "I don't like your elbow." Or "I've never heard of your pancreas." I've heard something that sounds to my ears like "Your collarbones are overrated" more times than I can count. [read more](#)

Peter O'Connor says

I arrived at this album later in life so was unaware of any of the controversies that surrounded it's release. It's got to be said - it is a bloody good album. Rather than dissecting the Exile's creation, Gina Arnold provides more of an analysis of the indie scene (Guyville) in Chicago in the early nineties along with comparisons with the current, free-for-all that is the musical landscape of today . That the music industry is male dominated and that Liz Phair was unfairly maligned is without question. Arnold is free then, to present her take on the scene without sounding preachy or like she is giving a lecture on equality. The 33 1/3 series can understandable be a little hit and miss but this one is a fresh take on an album and a scene that was at the heart of one of the last great musical revolutions.

Shawn says

I was eager to read this 33 1/3 offering on one of my favorite albums of the 90s, but I was sadly disappointed. When you're writing a book geared primarily toward music nerds, getting your facts right is a baseline expectation. So from the moments in the intro when Arnold referred to "The" Urge Overkill

(twice!") and "Twintones" Records, things went downhill. At least be sure to get lyrics (and song titles) right if you're going to quote them - you have the internet, after all (the song Mesmerizing is called Mesmerized, opening lines of 6'1 are quoted as, "...beautiful girls who are shyly brave, and you sell yourself as a fantasy," rather than the real lyric that actually fits the rhyme scheme: "...you sell yourself as *a man to save*"). Beyond music-related facts, Arnold has a bad habit of misusing words (e.g. saying Phair's song, Glory, "recoups" the Stones attempt to find authenticity by covering Slim Harpo). As for the actual analysis included in the book, exploring the notion of "Guyville" and whether it still exists in 21st century indie rock was an interesting idea, but I just don't buy much of anything Arnold is selling -- for instance, the notion that being in a band has lost cachet and earning power as more women have entered the field, like other previously male-dominated professions (indie rock is the new book-keeping?). And the point where the writer actually attempts the song-by-song comparison of the two Exiles reads like a bad Comp 101 assignment where our intrepid undergrad didn't have time to make it to the library, and so hit up her record collection for comparative essay fodder on the midnight before the due date. Ugh.

Geoff says

I really wanted this to be a good book.

I know the 33 1/3 books are all very idiosyncratic examinations of albums, but I listened to at least one song off of Exile in Guyville every day my senior year of high school. This album mattered and still matters to me. And the book didn't do it justice.

While the discussion of the "Guyville" Wicker Park Chicago music scene was interesting, and I liked the attempt to place Liz Phair and her subsequent career in context, the bulk of the book's compare and contrast analysis between Exile in Guyville and the Rolling Stones' Exile on Main Street was simplistic when it wasn't a huge stretch. A big let down.
