

Pull It Together, by Shannon Stephens

reviewed by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue



In Review



Pull It Together

by Shannon Stephens
Asthmatic Kitty

On her third album, Shannon Stephens reins in her chamber-folk experimentalism in favor of a bluesy little band that takes her songs to unexpected places. Her sound remains relatively subdued, yet it grooves and pops and even swaggers.

Stephens's songcraft is best at its most complex when her melodies and chord progressions dart around a little. "Care of You" is a standout; it quickly locates a darker corner of Americana, throws it a few pleasing curve balls and wraps up in three minutes flat. The disappointing "Buddy Up to the Bully," however, starts in a predictable blues-rock spot and simply stays put.

Both songs feature a signature trait: Stephens's emotionally immediate lyrics. These she writes with too much flair to come off as overearnest; her words are confident,

colorful and sometimes sarcastic. On “Out of Sight,” an electric piano groove sets up this attention-getter: “Oh the world owes me a living / Because I’m wonderful.” Having concisely established a persona of youthful entitlement, she soon turns its ungrateful attention to God: “He’s the one who made my life / How about making it less difficult?” The more sincere songs take the occasional turn toward sentimental cliché. But overall Stephens connects, offering direct language line to line and ambitious themes song to song.

Most ambitious is the deadpan “Faces Like Ours,” a wryly political take on the conversational duets of old Nashville. Stephens and guest vocalist Will Oldham trade comforting lines about why they’re “gonna be alright”—because of the various demographic traits that inflate their chances. As they name these one by one (e.g., “At least we have white skin”), a subtler critique emerges: privilege is a complex thing, and we can be blind to the whole even as we name its parts.

“Faces Like Ours” pulls out a lot of classic country stops, down to the lap steel and corny jokes. The setting also highlights the limits of Stephens’s singing: alongside Oldham’s subtle husk, she sounds too sweet and a bit thin. Throughout the record, Stephens sings with great control and technical nuance, up high and way down low. But often her voice is spot-on yet nondescript, like a great backup singer accustomed to filling a small sonic space.

She sounds best on the quieter material. “Cold November” is very good, a smoky old slow number accompanied by offbeat upright piano and ethereal voices. So is album closer “Responsible Too Long,” an emotive ballad that begins statically but soon builds toward classic pop lushness. It’s a late Beach Boys move, but a graceful and surprising one that demonstrates Stephens’s expansive imagination and her band’s deft touch. It sounds at once familiar and fresh, as good pop music always does.