



BEN ARTHUR

When Ben Arthur ruefully sings, "*The older I get, the more I realize/The best I can hope for is compromise,*" the singer-songwriter is only half-serious. After all, the young veteran hasn't toiled at his craft for more than a decade to give in without a fight. That line, from "Mary Ann"—one of the songs on his last album, *Edible Darling*—reflects the litany of near-misses he experienced after being heavily courted by several major record labels over the years.

"I never doubted that playing music is what I wanted to do," says the Virginia native, who laughs, "In fact, you can refer to me as 'The 'Artist Formerly Known as 'Waiter'.'" He says that music is what he lives for, even if at times he has had to do it while working in restaurants.

Yet from the moment the first song off *Edible Darling* hit radio he experienced immediate success, as "Mary Ann" came in as the #1 most added single that week. It didn't hurt, too, that Chicago's WXRT had come out strong, adding the song a full two weeks before the official add date. There was not a cut off the album that failed to get airplay, with some stations reporting 30-plus spins a week.

"People kept telling me that Triple-A embraces artists and not songs, but I have to say I wondered if maybe they all just meant to play Ben Harper and got confused," jokes Ben.

That humility and clear-eyed honesty extends to Arthur's lyrics. Often brooding and dark-laced, images of betrayal, sex, humiliation, faith, yearning and death float behind a super-melodic pop facade. "Tattoo" an upbeat acoustic number, is about sex, love...and suicide. Like much of Arthur's work, it looks mortality square in the face: "*Like Abraham, one day I awoke and realized/That along with the will, the hand, and the knife/The throat was also mine.*" The brooding "Exit Wound" shares similar themes. Yet, listening to "The Sun Also Rises"—Arthur's passionate duet with RCA recording artist Rachael Yamagata—you hear an uplifting message of hope and deliverance underneath the distorted electric guitars and driving rhythm section.

If you get the idea Ben Arthur is not your everyday pop-folk-rock-country-blues singer-songwriter, you're catching on.

The press seemed to get this vibe and took to it well. *Rolling Stone* says, "Ben Arthur's got the looks and hooks of John Mayer." He got similarly enthusiastic responses from publications like *Hits*, *Marie Claire*, *Performing Songwriter*, and *Music Today*. *CMJ* says, "Ben Arthur croons like Duncan Sheik if he had a pair...effortlessly delivered and beautifully composed."

Maybe the critics like the duality in Ben's music. "There's nothing in my work that doesn't smack of some pretty grim, difficult stuff," he says matter-of-factly. "Most of my songs are a marriage of contradictions: bleak and difficult sentiments lurking under upbeat, melodies."



Indeed, Arthur's lyrical poetry and delicate melodies remain key to his appeal, though he incorporates 808's, DJ-scratching and drum machines on several of the songs, with cellos and mandolins underlining others. There are bits and pieces of John Lennon's cheeky fatalism, Beck's homespun experiments, the earnestness of Kurt Cobain, Jeff Tweedy's seductive psychedelia, the exoticism of David Bowie.

Arthur first picked up a guitar when he was 14 and immediately began writing songs. At the beginning, he listened to Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Ozzy Osbourne, and AC/DC, none of which you can hear in his music. He went on to be influenced in his songwriting, so he insists, by Lyle Lovett and Michelle Shocked, which isn't exactly apparent, either. In Charlottesville, where he attended the University of Virginia, he developed a local following, and eventually shared the stage with Tori Amos, Shawn Colvin, Bruce Hornsby and fellow townsman Dave Matthews. In fact, Matthews's collaborators Boyd Tinsley and Tim Reynolds played on Arthur's first album, *Curses and Rapture*.

"I prefer lush images," he says. "I don't like songs that are too specific, too literal. What interests me is ambiguity and mystery, the spaces between the sentences. Like in 'Strawberry Fields': 'I mean, er, yes, well, no, that is, I think I disagree....' that's the way people talk. I'm most fascinated by the underlying contradictions in people's motivations, the way they deal with one another."

"Don't hold me at arms' length/Keep me sun-blurred and clean," he sings in "Sestina." Arthur's music is alluring pop, but if you take a closer look, it's not quite as pretty a picture, *"Pick up the pieces scattered resentments/From an old explosion/Grudges and barbs/All just mummery and gypsy fingers."*

Gypsyfingers is also the name of his second independently released effort, which came out in 2003. To complement his songwriting, Arthur says he likes to layer vocals and instruments to create a densely textured sound.

In fact, the melodic element of his music is so strong, the hooks so catchy, that it's possible to miss the underlying lyrical complexity and contradiction in his words. All of which is fine by Arthur.

"People can hear what they want in my music," he says. "Like in Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA', some people hear a patriotic anthem and others hear a protest song. If that happens with my music, I'm fine with that."

"In fact," he laughs, "that sounds perfect."

*Ben's new studio album **Mouthfeel** will be released in the fall.*