

THE PRETENDERS

BREAK UP THE CONCRETE

Chrissie Hynde - one of the boys or femme fatale? Provocateur or force of nature? Tremulous alto or ultimate rock & roll chick? Woman of the world or bandleader? How about all of them? Since forming the Pretenders three decades ago, Hynde has proven to be a one-of-a-kind tough-minded, outspoken and an utterly uncompromising artist - yet also capable of moments of heart-wrenching tenderness. .

Hynde has recorded just nine studio albums since the original Pretenders lineup cranked out their barrier-smashing debut in 1980 and *Break Up the Concrete* is but the second album to bear the Pretenders nameplate in a decade. That makes the arrival of any new Pretenders album something of an occasion and even outright celebration. Throughout the dozen songs on *Break Up the Concrete*, Hynde brings the trademark cool and much of the heat of the early Pretenders albums to a richly American setting. None of the five musicians who comprise this set of Pretenders has recorded with her before - but they take to her songs like they've been waiting all their lives for this moment. Legendary drummer Jim Keltner needs no introduction. HYNDE "I met Jim when we toured with Neil Young and dreamed of working with him ever since. Martin Chambers is the worlds most entertaining rock drummer that's for sure, but Keltner is an alchemist, a magician. I wanted a different groove on this album and Martin had no problem letting Jim take over for the project. Although Martin will be with us when we go on the road." The rest of the crew collectively represents something dynamic and fresh . Added to this is *Concrete* showing Hynde in peak form as a singer, engaged as a writer and p performing with the same vitality and intimacy of the classics she penned years ago.

No guest artists, no vanity duets, just five shit-hot players getting down to business, bashing out 11 songs in 12 intensive days live off the floor of a vintage Hollywood studio. The song-serving urgency Hynde's new cohorts bring to the party clearly contributed to the immediacy of her vocal performances, with her equally compelling tough and tender sides in full effect – each imbued with the aching nuance of life experience.

English guitarist James Walbourne has played with indie-rock darlings the Pernice Brothers. *High Fidelity* author and hard-core music fan Nick Hornby recently described the preternaturally skilled young gun as "an unearthly cross between James Burton, Peter Green and Richard Thompson; Walbourne's fluid, tasteful, beautiful solos drop the jaw, stop the heart, and smack the gob, all at the same time." On pedal steel is Eric Heywood, who's brought his signature overdriven sound to the original lineup of alt-country trailblazers Son Volt, and to the records of Joe Henry, the Jayhawks and Alejandro Escovedo; more recently, he's been recording and touring with singer/songwriter Ray LaMontagne. HYNDE "James had worked with Eric and suggested we bring him in. His playing is often more akin to a sound effect. Imagine our surprise when we heard the jazz flute of "Almost Perfect"." Bassist Nick Wilkinson, the longest-tenured Pretender, poached from a North London punk karaoke band, has toured extensively with The Pretenders over the last few years, and, like Walbourne, has an innate feel for American roots idioms.

The grittily elegant "Don't Lose Faith in Me" enables Hynde to give her most soulful vocal performance since her 1984 cover of the Persuaders' "Thin Line Between Love and Hate," and the poignant but buoyant "Love's a Mystery" ponders the ongoing challenges of conjugal commitment on the way to the payoff lines, "But I'd do it again/I'd do it again," the impact underscored by her vibrato, while the exceedingly offbeat "Almost Perfect" has to be the most-lemon-tart song she's ever dreamed up, melodically or lyrically (sample lines: "Unemployable, illegal/You're a whole film by Don Siegel").

"Boots of Chinese Plastic" opens the album in mind-blowing fashion, as Chrissie attacks the elliptically metaphysical lyric with the primal intensity she brought to the more earthbound concerns of "Precious" and "Tattooed Love Boys," while Walbourne sounds like he's channeling the great James Honeyman-Scott himself. "Don't Cut Your Hair" hits with the force of a Category 5 storm, the righteously old-school "Rosalee", the only non Hynde penned song on the album, written by Robert Kidney, rocks out in real time, right down to Chrissie's initial throat clearing and command to the band to crank out one more chorus. They soup up the Bo-Diddley beat on "Break Up the Concrete," inspiring her to spit out a feral speed-chant at the ends of two choruses.

Rock's great iconoclast, Neil Young, perfectly summed up what we all know about Chrissie Hynde: "She's a rock & roll woman. She's got it in her heart. She's gonna be rocking till she drops."

The truth of that statement is right here in the grooves of *Break Up The Concrete*.