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Jim Farber

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Joan Osborne sings about a lover on her new CD, "Little Wild One." But it's not one made from flesh and blood. It's a soul composed of skyscrapers and subways, rivers and parks. It's crowds and neighborhoods Osborne loves, that meeting place between hopeful architecture and noisy life that forms the core of New York.

"All these people, living together in this throng can seem chaotic," Osborne says. "But there's a spiritual side to it, too. Everyone arrives from different backgrounds and brings a thread of where they came from to make this new world. That's what I first fell in love with."

Osborne makes her ardor obvious in "Hallelujah in the City," which rhapsodizes over the moods of Riverside Drive, the lights of Chelsea and the hills of Morningside Heights. In other songs, Osborne toasts Tompkins Square Park, Red Hook and the Brooklyn ferry, and even ends the disk with a prayer to be buried in the bowels of the Battery.

If her lyrics have the feel of a homecoming, the entire CD represents a broader return for the singer. It's the first album Osborne has recorded in 13 years with the trio of musicians who helped her soar to success in 1995 on her multiplatinum CD "Relish" - Rob Hyman, Eric Bazilian and Rick Chertoff. Their collective work yielded the star's sole top10 hit, "One of Us," a song that so overshadowed her career, it duped the uninformed into considering her a one-hit wonder.

In fact, in the time since, Osborne has carved out a broad and consistent cult career, recording several erudite soul CDs, touring with the Motown house band, the Funk Brothers, crooning country ballads at the Grand Ole Opry and even serving as a guest singer with the Grateful Dead on two national tours.

"There's a thread that connects all those sounds," Osborne says. "It's American roots music. I'm just fortunate that I can follow my heart through all these styles."

She began to do that 20 years ago, when she first arrived in New York from her native Kentucky to attend NYU. "I got off the Trailways bus and thought, Oh my God, this is incredible," Osborne says. "The first thing that hit me was the life of the streets. You go to most American cities and you have to drive. You don't have the interaction you have here, that sense of neighborhood."

Osborne moved to Brooklyn after college and played for some years in local bands, honing a raspy blues-soul style, with a mature, randy and womanly point of view that made many think of Bonnie Raitt. She put out an indie CD in 1992, but didn't enjoy a major-label release until she was 33 years old, with 1995's "Relish."

At the time, estrogen-friendly singer-songwriters were on the ascendancy: It was the peak of the Lilith Fair phenomenon, a wave Osborne rode to the tune of 3 million copies sold of "Relish." Yet, she wasn't happy.

"No one wants to hear someone complain about fame, but it was hard to deal with," says Osborne. "I guess I'm a more private person. I didn't realize what goes along with that kind of success."

Worse, her label didn't like the material she submitted to follow up "Relish," so they dropped her. Five years passed before another CD appeared ("Righteous Love"). And while it floundered commercially, it proved to those paying attention that Osborne had a talent way beyond her initial hit.

Osborne admits she "might have copped an attitude" about working with her "Relish" collaborators again. She felt their "One of Us" hit gave listeners too narrow a view of her talent. But the musicians had never fallen out personally, and due to a break in their mutual schedules last year, they found themselves piecing together new music once again.

The organizing lyrical theme they hit on for the CD - the city - came about, in part, as a greatly delayed reaction to 9/11. "It took a while for the impact to bubble up," Osborne says. "I'm not like Bruce Springsteen who could turn around and write about it right away" (on "The Rising").

While the singer says the album isn't "about" 9/11 per se, she feels the event renewed her love of the city. "It made me view it with fresh eyes," she says.

For added inspiration, Osborne went back to the poems of Walt Whitman, which celebrate the city in all its unruly, sensual glory. "He had this way of weaving together the spiritual and the erotic," Osborne says.

So does Osborne, who on the CD mixes up a love for a person and a place as if there's no divide. Only someone who has been allowed to follow her muse all the

way around would arrive at such a junction. Which explains why Osborne feels so much more content in her current career than at her commercial peak.

"I've had enough success that I can sustain a career, but not so much that I've got anyone standing over me expecting the music to sound like this or that," she says. "I think I'm pretty lucky."