

# Dream Girl

By Olivia Stren

How to become a certified pop diva without losing your indie boyfriend. The unstoppable ambition of Feist

Photography by Davida Nemeroff

**L**ESLIE FEIST IS SITTING QUIETLY in a booth at the Rivoli. She has a soft spot for the restaurant, since she used to work here as a bartender, before she had to worry about major-label record deals and fanatically coordinated PR campaigns. Her hair is tied up in a schoolgirl ponytail, lips smudged with cherry gloss, nails dressed in chipping remnants of last week's scarlet polish. She is busy assembling a care package of miniature '70s vintage clothes (picked up on a recent trip through London's Portobello market) for a friend's new baby. Even her baby presents are perfectly indie. The 31-year-old singer is pale and looks a bit tired, which gives her a dreamy, hard-living alt-rock sex appeal. If her tight pale-blue jeans and well-pilled woollen sweater look like they've spent the better part of their nomadic lives heaped on hotel room floors, it's because they have.

Feist is Canada's reigning indie-music princess, but she's wooing a broader audience. *Let It Die*, her last album, sold over 100,000 copies in Canada and another 400,000 worldwide, earning her a Juno for best new artist and best alternative album. Her

new album, *The Reminder*, came out in May and is being treated to an aggressive marketing push. It debuted in second place on Canadian album charts, at first place in iTunes downloads, and seems to be playing in Starbucks the world over (her label, Arts & Crafts/EMI, arranged a distribution deal with the coffee chain). *The Reminder* meanders from bossa nova to folk rock, lilting ballads and an exuberant cover of "Sealion Woman," most famously performed by Nina Simone (her idol, she says). Feist co-produced *The Reminder* and laboured over the lyrics. Marked by grown-up regret and little-girl idealism, it's just mild enough to secure huge commercial success.

Our meeting is the long-awaited result of a series of ludicrously complex exchanges with her publicist, detailing the frenzy of Feist's schedule and the virtual impossibility of meeting with her for more than 15 minutes. Feist is furiously busy at the moment, I'm told with irritation. She's rehearsing her new album, embarking on a frantic interview schedule with the international press (including *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*), heading on her next tour and shooting videos for two of *The Reminder*'s leading tracks. She's also singing on a soundtrack for the upcoming Ethan Hawke-directed film *The Hottest State*, alongside Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson. My expectations—to speak not only with Feist, but with some of her closest friends and relatives—are apparently hopelessly naive. You'd think I was planning a coffee date with Barbra Streisand.

Her battalion of handlers seems to have a better sense of her burgeoning celebrity than she does—or than she'll admit to. When Feist and I finally chat over chai tea lattes (she asks for hers sweetened with maple syrup), all signs of divadom are well hidden. She talks about how she doesn't even own a proper stereo and how she's considering investing in an iPod dock. And when I ask about her two upcoming concerts at Massey Hall, she plays the guileless-girl-in-a-big-city card to charming effect, explaining with wide eyes how she's never been to the venue and how she's confused it with Carnegie Hall ever since she was little. Then she presses her fingers to her temples and emits a little giggle. "Just had a sugar rush from the syrup," she says.

**L**IKE SEATTLE WAS TO EARLY-'90s grunge, Toronto is to the burgeoning indie rock scene. Cost of living is a factor: it's still possible to survive in Parkdale on art and ramen. Leading the rhythmic charge are guitar pop bands like Metric and the Hidden Cameras. The biggest of them all is the sprawling collective Broken Social Scene (Feist, a sometime BSS performer, is girlfriend of ringleader Kevin Drew). Over the past four years, the bands' music has worked its way into college dorms and vintage clothing shops everywhere, claiming pride of place in the iPod of any self-respecting hipster.

Every scene needs its pin-ups and, for this one, Feist is it. But her allure doesn't just come from her glam-gamine looks; it also comes by grace of her unusual voice, both sultry and soaring, and her scrappy guitar-playing style. Her mannered candour is winsome in the allegedly no-bullshit indie universe (one that's so

unpretentious, it's pretentious). But where BSS is deemed hugely successful by indie standards (*You Forgot It in People* sold 90,000 worldwide), Feist is in the stratosphere, and her commercial success threatens her mystique. You can't be indie and sing for soccer moms on 97.3 EZ Rock.

Success requires determination, but in these circles admitting to ambition is verboten. "I didn't want to do anything half-assed," she says, casting her pursuits in a more forgivable light. Her long-time friend, musician and producer Chilly Gonzales (née Jason Beck), who helped produce the new album, doesn't buy her casual, seat-of-my-pants posturing. "She's probably the most ambitious person I know," he says over the phone from his studio in Berlin. "What makes Feist such a good performer is that she wants it. She needs it. It's Darwinian, in my view—the one who wants it the most gets it."

**F**EIST TENDS TO SPEAK in fanciful tangents. On writing music, she muses as if the subject were unicorns or shooting stars. "It's never happened the same way twice," she says. "How many great loves do you get? Do you get one great love? More than one? How many songs do you get in your life? I'm not hungry to write songs for the sake of writing songs. They'll come when

it's the season. You don't write in your daytimer, I'm going to have my first kiss on Tuesday at 4. You just wait and see when



it happens. And the anticipation is part of the fun. The whole point is the curiosity."

She inherited her bohemian sensibility from itinerant parents. Feist's father, Harold, was an abstract-expressionist painter and a visual arts instructor at the Alberta College of Art when he met her mother, Lyn, who was studying ceramics at the time. "My dad was a prof and my mom was his student—hubba hubba," Feist says with coy eyes. The couple had their first child (Ben, now a computer programmer in Toronto) right away. Harold landed a job teaching at Mount Allison, and the family had moved to the Maritimes by the time

she was born. But her parents divorced when she was young, and she and Ben moved with their mother to their grandparents' hometown of Regina and later to Calgary.

Mocky, another musician friend, believes that Feist's early years in Saskatchewan gave her the clear-skied prairie-girl sensibility that sweetens her music: "I recognized in her a prairie attitude reminiscent of Neil Young or Joni Mitchell. There's a loneliness and open-road mentality, a folksy mood in her music. I can feel that yearning and longing."

As a kid, she thought she wanted to be a journalist. She liked writing short stories, and journalism seemed the most plausible career choice. But she also loved to sing (she sang around the house and in local choirs) and started a rock band called Placebo with fellow students when she was 15. "I didn't have an incredible voice," she says, "so I yarled." She'd vaguely planned to go to university, but a year later, her band won in their first high school battle of the bands; the prize was a mainstage gig in a festival outside Calgary headlined by the Ramones, the Violent Femmes and Bad Brains. "The band was occupying all my time—and passion and excitement," she says.

She moved out of her mom's house when she was 17, took a job as a cook, and with the help of *Book Your Own Fuckin' Life*, a punk resource that lists North American venues, she and her band found ways of renting community halls and clubs, and played to any falafel-eating local who'd listen. "I was young and I'm so glad I schooled myself in the ridiculous school of the rock-and-roll tour party," she says. "We were drinking and having a great time, you know? We'd take mushrooms and go out in the woods, then

You can't sing for soccer moms who listen to 97.3 EZ Rock and still expect to keep your indie cred

realize, oh, we got a gig!" Her roommate at the time, Jay Woolley (now a Calgary-based drummer) remembers her constantly writing lyrics in a notebook by her bed. "Watching her perform, I was totally blown away," he says. "She was so emotionally driven. She's got a really big personality in a quiet way. You always knew there was something bigger in store for her."

It wasn't drive but random circumstances that prompted her move to Toronto at 20. During a Placebo tour, she lost her voice. "We were in Winnipeg and we were playing in some horrible basement pub, and I remember starting to bleed out of my throat. My throat had blistered." Exhausted, painfully laryngitic and poor (the band only ever made enough money for gas to wheel them to their next show), Feist heard about a musical injuries specialist in Toronto. By this point, she was literally mute, and her bass player had to book her flight and appointment. The break was timely: Feist was growing bored of punky, aggressive vocals, and the Placebo teen-spirit moment had expired.

She'd spent summer vacations with her dad in Toronto, where he'd settled to work as a painter, and that year she moved into the basement of his Annex house. She focused on healing her voice holistically: she swam, did Tai Chi and avoided singing, even talking. Eventually she started playing guitar and writing songs (her first was called "Liza," an eight-verse country tune about a girl who leaves the small town for the big city). After six months of downtime, her voice healed and she leaped into a compensatory frenzy of activity: she took a job bartending and booking acts at the Rivoli and another waitressing at College Street's Lava Lounge. Revealing a talent for charming the right people, she landed a plum gig assisting the manager of the Rheostatics. She played bass for a friend's band, Noah's Arkweld, organized cabaret nights at the now-defunct Weave, which was on Dundas across from the AGO, and eventually landed a job singing with local indie rock institution By Divine Right.

She left her dad's basement for what she proudly deems a "legendary apartment called the 701" above Queen West sex shop Come As You Are. Merrill Nisker, a friend of a friend, moved in with her, and that year began to perform as the bawdy electro-punk musician Peaches. Feist, in a pink leotard and brandishing a sock puppet, would work the back of the stage at Peaches' early shows in art galleries, Kensington Market lofts and bars. "I was her B-Girl, her Flavor Flav," she says. "It was what we did in our living room—playing dress-up, jumping on the couch rapping to other records—but we were onstage."

That was around the time she met Gonzales. What struck him was her readiness and an almost over-the-top enthusiasm. "She was amazing in her ability to meet everybody in a very short time," he says. "She was very quickly ubiquitous. Everybody in the music scene had heard about her and wanted to play with her. But in those days she was very unfocused, which was as much a strength as a detriment. She was hyperactive, a kid in a candy store, hungry to make her way into the big-city music scene, hungry to make connections. But I remember thinking, if this girl could harness this energy into her singing—wow!"

There is more poetry in serendipity than in planning, which may explain why Feist likes to attribute her career milestones to happy accident. In her mid-20s, she moved to Europe to tour with Gonzales and Peaches, doing her goofy dance-rap-and-sock-puppet act (her stage name was Bitch Lap Lap). When Peaches broke off on her own, Feist continued to tour with Gonzales, seeing Moscow, St. Petersburg, Glasgow, Rome and Stockholm. While on tour, she decided to work on a

demo she'd recorded in Toronto. It would eventually become *Let It Die*, a slick follow-up to her first album, 1999's *Monarch*, a small release of unpolished songs she sold at performances.

Gonzales had just met French music producer Renaud Letang (behind such commercial sensations as Manu Chao), who invited them to work in his studio in Paris. "Renaud is like the Daniel Lanois of France," Feist says. "He's a huge figure. But I didn't know any of that. It was more like, 'Hey, this guy invited us to his studio, let's go!'" The trio began producing a series of five covers (including a slinky version of the Bee Gees' 1979 hit "Love You Inside Out") and six original tracks. "We thought it might just be a cover album that would come out on a shitty indie label in Berlin," Gonzales says. "It was this naive girl singing songs for the first time. But people liked it." Indie music label Arts & Crafts swiftly signed her, and the album was picked up for distribution by Interscope/EMI. While working on the album, Feist began to understand that the strength of her voice lay in its softness and vulnerability. "Just imagine having a conversation with someone you don't know very well in a loud bar," she says. "How much are you really going to learn about them, and how much are they going to learn about you, if you're screaming at each other, battling the DJ? But then, having a conversation where you can send all those tiny messages through your eyes and through the timbre of your voice, and you can pick up on everything."

The album became a phenomenon largely because of one track: "Mushaboom." Feist wrote it after passing randomly through a Nova Scotia hamlet of the same name. "I was doing a little maritime driving, picnicking and hanging out, and I passed a house for sale, and stopped to peer in the windows. And I dreamt it up. Dreamt up the dream," she says. "The house was so beautiful. It cost \$120,000 and I had, you know, eight cents back then, and I thought, if I could just have this little piece of land on the ocean among the lilac bushes."

After the 2003 release of *Let It Die*, Feist embarked on a gruelling 33-month tour. As it wound down, she launched right into making *The Reminder*, but decided it would only bloom in a Euro-utopia. "Making my list of pipe dreams, I wanted to work among trees and grass and budding flowers." And by now she could afford to indulge her fantasies, so she rented a 200-year-old manor house outside Paris for two weeks, inviting her band and her personal dream team of musicians (including Gonzales, Mocky and British singer Jamie Lidell) to collaborate. Her bedroom was in a turret overlooking the Seine, and she paints the scene with typically Feistian romantic flair: "We set up in the parlour, with glass sliding doors and unbelievable spring light pouring in. It had 15-foot ceilings and crown mouldings and couches and bookshelves and a fireplace. At night, the doors creaked open and the dogs would run in and out. I'd slide down the banister in the morning and land in front of the microphone. Everybody would be eating their cereal, and I'd say, 'Guys! Come on! Let's go!' It was one of the most potent and purely joyful times in my life." In a couple of weeks, the group emerged with the core of a new album, then recorded a further five songs in Toronto.

Several tracks were recorded in one take (a retro, Beatles-esque method), lending the music a rustic immediacy. Feist also decided to avoid using headphones as much as possible (headphones, she explains, create an unnecessary barrier to fellow performers). Gonzales believes the album is her true coming-out. "Feist is finally living up to her potential," he says. "She knows how her voice affects people now. She's no longer in a studio with headsets wondering why the hell she's singing a song by Barry Gibb. She has confidence now, and knows how to control her innocence a bit."

**F**EIST AND I MEET AGAIN for lunch at the Queen Mother Café. She's just returned from a two-week press tour in Paris, London and New York, and she's edgier, more nervous today. She's not feeling well—her throat hurts. The illness is likely a manifestation of pre-performance jitters ("She always has that inexplicable sore throat before she performs," Gonzales says). Tonight she's treating a small audience to songs from *The Reminder*; it's the album's public debut, but she's not anxious about it, she claims, as she takes quick sips from a two-litre water bottle she's hauling around. It's lunchtime, but she's not hungry (she orders a small soup to soothe her throat) and is clearly in a rush to leave, having traded the fresh-faced modesty of our earlier meeting for the role of jaded artist bored by all the media attention. Her EMI publicist warns me, again, that Feist has precious little time to spare, and talks protectively about her—the delicate genius who must be spared from nerve-jangling journalistic agendas. This second meeting, I'm made to feel, is a rare privilege, and Feist is reluctant, but obliged.

When I ask her about personal subjects, she bristles. Her family is now off-limits. So is her boyfriend, Kevin Drew (who is rumoured to have an "F" tattoo). Same goes for her former boyfriends, BSS members Brendan Canning and Andrew Whiteman. She closes the discussion: "I just don't want them in this part of my life, and I don't think they want to be in this part of my life." She's more comfortable talking in cryptic analogies about the process of album creation, careful to keep things impersonal. "It's going from inaction to action," she says. "There's the stillness of the plateau, and then you throw yourself down the hill or down the water-slide—there's momentum. Any exciting idea has momentum, and you're going to go until that momentum extinguishes—all that's internal, that's the marrow of an album. It's not, Here's my theme, here's the concept. It's all unconscious."

Feist technically lives with Drew in Toronto and keeps a pied-à-terre in Paris, but actually spends little time at either place. She's heading on tour this spring and summer, through Canada, the U.S. and Europe. She's been shooting videos for *The Reminder*'s "My Moon My Man" and "1234." But she'd rather not reveal any details: "I don't want to sell them short by describing an embryo." A few weeks later, the video for "1234" appears on YouTube. As Feist sings the childlike ditty, a team of colourfully clad dancers swirls around like birthday candles come to life, and hoist her above their heads. She lounges in the palms of their hands with regal languor.

Tonight's show is at St. George the Martyr Anglican Church, where Feist performs for an intimate audience of about 200 friends and journalists. She's wearing the same T-shirt and tight black skinny jeans she wore at lunchtime, but her hair is down and brushed, swinging in front of her face as she performs. Her red guitar looks too big and heavy for her little frame, like she's a kid pretending to be a rock star. But she is poised and in charge, her movements spare, the attention fixed on the gossamer delicacy of her voice—when it pitches to high notes, it takes on an about-to-crack quality, like it just might evaporate if strained any further. It's a vulnerability she gracefully controls, the audience perfectly still, everyone seeming nearly as besotted as Drew, who watches admiringly, dressed in a classic indie uniform of Adidas with Rasta-coloured logo, tight jeans and tweedy jacket. Between numbers, people turn to each other and gush about how much they love her. She sings the limpid "Limit to Your Love," and the song ends with a husky declaration that her love, in fact, has no limit. It seems clear her celebrity doesn't, either. **END**