

Audio Reviews

Rereleasing Linda Smith and Opening a Bedroom-Pop Window

Linda Smith. 2024. *Nothing Else Matters*. Captured Tracks. Mixed by George Hagegeorge. Mastered by Jamie Harley. Vinyl & Digital, 13 tracks, 44 minutes.

Linda Smith. 2024. *I So Liked Spring*. Captured Tracks. Mixed by George Hagegeorge. Mastered by Jamie Harley. Vinyl & Digital, 12 Tracks, 31 minutes.

Nothing satisfies quite like a good comeback, except maybe an obscure archive of underheard independent music that fans get to rediscover through digging and reissues. Linda Smith blesses us with both simultaneously: a stream of new music and rereleases of earlier work that broadens her niche in a lineage, and a contemporary practice of singer songwriter self-production. Considered a pioneer of bedroom pop, the Baltimore songwriter Linda Smith self-recorded and released a number of albums primarily on cassette in the 1980s and 1990s. After an almost twenty-year break from recording, the interest in her earlier work continues to bloom. The recent return to her practice includes 2023 releases like *Sacred Songs Reimagined*, a short collection of electronic interpretations of sacred songs and spirituals, and *A Passing Cloud*, a collaborative project recomposing music written by former housemate Nancy Andrews in the early 1990s. During the break from musicmaking, her work surfaced around the internet, from blogs to compilations, leading to official reissues. Following the 2021 anthology of her work *Till Another Time: 1988–1996*, label Captured Tracks has now released two full albums from this period: *Nothing Else Matters* (1995) and *I So Liked Spring* (1996, originally released by Shrimper). Smith's sound world blends her voice, guitar, auxiliary percussion, samples, and synthesized sound, filtered through the affordances and limitations of home recording methods. Timbrally rich, carefully balanced, and detailed with sonic intimacy, each album presents a virtuosic exploration of the soundscape composed between performer and recording-reproduction machinery within Linda Smith's home recording ecosystem.

The phonograph introduced consumers to the potentials of home recording as early as the end of the nineteenth century. However, technological limitations and operational difficulty made early wax and disc recording more viable for office dictation and field use by researchers than for recording the family band at home. The recording wore out after multiple plays and duplication was not feasible. Even commercial production constraints pushed professional musicians and the medium to experimental limits for an inconsistent and fragile final product. Over half a century later, magnetic

tape—particularly compact cassette tape—opened the gates for quality home recording with its ease of use and accessibility. Compact portable audio allowed mobility of the active listener and encouraged movement of the small, recorded object within local communities and over long distances, cementing and disseminating regional styles. It was the people’s medium, and as Marc Masters expresses in *High Bias*, tape was infectious and communal: “One person does something by themselves on tape, and soon enough a bunch of people are doing it by themselves, together” (Masters 2023: 3). The malleability and mobility of tape contributed to its wide reach, and factored heavily in the production and reception of Linda Smith’s work in the 80s and 90s.

Although her work can be described as a sort of proto-bedroom pop, this is not the type of lo-fi bedroom pop produced on a busted 4-track with thin instrumentation. Recorded on a Fostex R8, a relatively compact 8-track reel to reel with 1/4" tape, *Nothing Else Matters* and *I So Liked Spring* lack the heavy hiss and distortion of many home audio projects on tape. A diverse palette of electronic and acoustic instruments intertwines through thoughtful orchestration, often creating moments of timbral mystery through the mix. The two albums share much sonic DNA. Guitar, voice, and certain percussion consistently feature across both, while a variety of bold instrumental ideas cut through the arrangements. Neither overpower nor overstay, such as the Casio-sounding synth on “I’ll Never See You Again” or the toy piano on “Little To Be Won,” both on *Nothing Else Matters*. After the introduction of synthesized sounds into the sonic landscape on earlier tracks of the same album, the higher, sawtooth-like instrument playing square melodies and meandering trills on “For Here Or To Go” only fully presents itself as a violin in the last 45 seconds of the song. The shapeshifting and control of sound demonstrate a keen attention to color not always at the fore in songwriting.

Recurring moments of angularity—off kilter instances of sound, timbre, or melodic idea—characterize Smith’s music and distinguish it through the energy of occasional unpredictability. If *Nothing Else Matters* introduces pops of color through arrangement and wistful lyricism by English poet Charlotte Mew, the follow-up *I So Liked Spring* adds flavor through pushing form and harmony. Dissonance takes a central role on tracks like “In The Fields” and “May 1915” with detuned instruments, harmonic clashes, and modal exploration. While containing some of the more adventurous tunes, this album simultaneously gestures towards the shape of bedroom pop to come on “The Pedlar,” a driving pop tune with a constant kick drum outlining the pulse, and a restrained yet effective usage of stereo delay on vocals and guitar. Its whispery vocals, with perhaps a dash more reverb, sound perfectly fitting on a contemporary bedroom pop playlist. On “From a Window” we hear the negative space around the recording, the room tone and subtle movement around her home studio, a spatial intimacy that stands as another hallmark of lo-fi bedroom pop. A voicemail from a friend on “Only A Moment” from *Nothing Else Matters* introduces another form of spatial intimacy within mediated and localized space: the particular American accent, the microcassette grain, the history of sampling voicemails across multiple genres. The edges of the medium lay bare within a deliberately crafted sound world, a tension in the rift between the reality and fantasy of recorded music that

often gets exposed outside of the commercial studio setting. The listener hears the closeness of the process and the performer in the seams of lo-fi home recording.

Intimacy permeates the albums through artifacts of the medium extending beyond an expected tape grain into an ever-presence of the performer within the material. Tiny breath and mouth sounds fill the space of both albums, often before the beginning of a phrase, and sometimes in long stretches between vocal moments when the small wet pop of lips opening punctuates the texture. The timbre, familiar to anyone who has spent time fussing with takes of their own voice, calls attention to itself almost as motivic material that switches focus between foreground and background, animating what could otherwise be heard as negative space. This organic wetness sounds like the barnacles in Hildegard Westerkamp's "Kits Beach Soundwalk" (1989) or the shrimps featured in Jana Winderen's "The Noisiest Guys on the Planet" (2023). Little pops and clicks pepper these natural sound worlds, sometimes in the foreground and sometimes in back, and the composers of these eco-acoustic works negotiate the focal point of the listening ear between layers of composed soundscape, the sounds of oceanic life versus the sound of city and machine. In contrast, the grain of Smith's voice present in her home recording illuminates the relationships between body and machine within her practice. Like the shifting proximity of the barnacles on Kits Beach, we hear above and below the surface of Smith's music, the musical content and the capture and curation of it.

When producing the voice, the presence of the body left in recording often demands particular attention, whether through minimization or other editing. An editor can remove, emphasize, or swap one preparatory breath for another in a digital audio workstation (DAW) like Pro Tools or Ableton with such ease that it can be practically automated. Fabulous suites of audio editing tools filter out pops, clicks, and noise with a simple key tap. The process is so frictionless that the potential to compose every detail of the voice introduces its own burden of complications. If the editor removes all artifacts, the voice floats without context, untethered to its body. But this is a non-issue in Linda Smith's music, and not for a lack of editing or precision in that editing. The artifacts throughout her music and other lo-fi—the sounds of Smith's voice, room noise, and media grain—add layers of nuance and proximity through mixtures of chance and intentionality in the process of recording and reproduction.

Identified on Bandcamp as a pioneer who released "several collections of delicate, bewitching solo music on cassette in the 1980s and 90s," I do find it interesting that both rereleases of *Nothing Else Matters* and *I So Liked Spring* are only available for digital and vinyl release, not tape—especially in a landscape of tape revival. An album on record communicates legitimacy in its fixed grooves. Vinyl is higher-fi, bigger and heavier, and performable but not necessarily alterable. Tape always has the potential to be recycled. A finished album can easily turn back into a blank cassette, or a tape loop, or a pile of magnetic spaghetti after the deck decides today is not its day. While a vinyl record generally has more rigidity and predictability in its playback, it also lacks the potential for use in the home recording ecosystem, something that feels spiritually relevant to the listening, reproduction, and distribution of the music. However, the DIY is constantly in

flux, the channels for sharing music ever changing, and so format changes appropriately. Whether recording on a 4-track or with a Focusrite into Audacity, the imprint of Linda Smith's home recording ecosystem is left on the music before it reaches reproduction for the listener. The Captured Tracks reissues of *Nothing Else Matters* and *I So Liked Spring* offer a compelling snapshot of time and medium, independent songwriting in the 90's, and capture the allure of her music regardless of era and format.

Bibliography

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