

The Essence of Abra Moore

Hard to Be Fragile

by Joe Mitchell

I like to reach up, grab the

essence, and run with it," says Abra Moore, grabbing some air just above and to the right of her head. She holds a tightly clenched fist aloft for a moment before pulling it down to just below her jutted chin. She gently rocks it to and fro like a sleeping baby. Her lips purse and her eyes blaze as she searches across the room for her next words. She looks at the fist, then across the room again. The words don't come, but she's said enough without them. There's something very heavy in her grip.

Moore's story would be better told in a fairy tale than a journalistic feature. She's more about metaphor and allegory than straight linear narrative. Her life and the stories she tells of it do not move fluidly from point A to point B, but bounce about the alphabet of chronology in pursuit of some ultimate truth that is often so obvious and simple as to become beautifully complex in its transcendence. The old adage "Time is of the essence" does not fly in Moore's world. Taking Dylan's old line out of its facetious context, "She's an artist; she don't look back."

Moore says she didn't choose music as her life. It chose her. She had a propensity for singing at an early age, falling by accident into a musical career when she joined up as a traveling minstrel in the earliest incarnation of Poi Dog Pondering. After pretty much selling everything she owned (as all the members did) to fly from Honolulu to Los Angeles and to help buy a van for the gaggle's touring of the mainland, her adventures in Poi Dog eventually led her to Austin.

"We woke up on this beautiful campus and made our way over to `the Drag' and everything went right," recalls Moore. "The people were so great and we knew this was our kind of place. It's my home now. Austin is this comfy place I keep coming back to, no matter where I go." It's true. Despite stints over the last several years in such illustrious cities as San Francisco, New York, and Paris -- where she made a lot of worldwide connections while singing for spare *monnaie* on the streets -- Moore's Zip Code still starts with 787.

While Moore was honing her skills as a performer with Poi, she began trying her hand at writing. After an amicable break with the band, of which she remains a sometime member, her full attention leapt into solo work. That labor has now paid off with her debut LP *Sing* (on Denver's Bohemia Beat label, for whom fellow voicemeister Jimmy LaFave also records), which shows off not only an incredible voice that Austin has known about for years, but also a keen talent for writing songs with lots of soul and power. Aside from the originals, Moore also put on the LP venerable versions of material by Poi-leader Frank Orrall, the band Olomana, and Austin "hidden jewel" Andrea Perry. Perry's "I Look Around" is a terribly catchy tune in Moore's capable hands, sounding happily mellow and mainstream enough to knock Sheryl Crowe off her throne as VH-1

queen. The LP has made a splash, garnering accolades from critics and fans internationally, and has taken its place among the top Austin Artist LPs of 1995.

Moore has been compared in numerous media to Rickie Lee Jones and Edie Brickell, a fact that does not surprise her. "All three of us are white girls who grew up listening to the blues," asserts Moore. The physical similarities among the three cannot be denied. Yet on an emotional level, Moore has many other kindred spirits. She has a bent for the ethereal that gives her an emotional imprint not unlike that of big-sound bands Cocteau Twins and Innocence Mission, and an occasional tough-babe stance reminiscent of Brenda Kahn and Liz Phair.

Looking further below the surface, *Sing* is not just an LP to Moore. It's an act of soul therapy. "It's been a real healing thing," she confides. "It's dedicated to my mother who I lost when I was four. It's given me some closure in my life about her death."

In the LP's title cut, Moore sings to her mother as though she has been granted a brief visit from beyond.

"Look at my eyes and my nose and my fingertips/I'm lookin' so much like you/Look at the way that I switch my walk mama/I'm walkin like you used to do."

Moore becomes the little girl again in the presence of her mother, proud of how much she has become like her, hoping her mother will feel the same way. If her mother were to hear this LP, pride would certainly not be distant. *Sing's* reception has kept Moore busy. She's now in the midst of a three-week East Coast tour opening for Poi Dog. Thereafter, she heads over to Europe for dates in Holland, France, and other points. She will then go back into the studio to start her second LP for Boho Beat in February. Guitar all-pro Mitch Watkins, who produced *Sing*, will helm this one, too.

"I'm gathering songs," says Moore. "It's coming together. I'll have my harmonica player, J.P. Allen this time." (Allen missed the first album.) "He's from New York. He's really good. I'm also gathering-up all these fine Austin musicians and we'll make another great record." The album is currently slated for a June '96 release.

Through all the work and notoriety, Moore has managed to keep her feet planted firmly on the ground, retaining a realistic personal and artistic philosophy. "The bottom line is this," says Moore of her credo, "live simply and express myself." What does she express? "Pain, joy, and the hardships of survival," she sighs, her visage growing quickly distant and pensive. "It's really hard attaining your goals, your visions, your dreams." She ponders the floor a bit, then looks back up. "It's really hard being fragile."

True to her philosophy, Moore does not measure the success of *Sing* and her career in general in terms of record sales, packed shows, or good reviews. "It's about love and giving. That's what it's for. If I can touch one person, that's it. I did it. I succeeded."

She's succeeded at least a thousand times over. Perhaps when that clenched fist opens, we'll be touched again. n