

Q&A

Jenny Conlee of **The Decemberists** talks about the hazards of recording a rock opera, challenging Stephen Colbert to a duel, and being accused of Communism.

Your new album, *The Hazards of Love*, is a concept album that tells the epic story of two lovers. Where did the idea for it come from?

Colin Meloy [The Decemberists' singer-songwriter] was really interested in old folk-revival music like that of Anne Briggs and other artists of the 60s and 70s. There's a lot of mythology and archetypes and recurring symbols – themes that have shown up in folk songs over the past 100 years. Colin took those and created his own fable.

The album has been well received by critics. Do you think it is a good representation of the band?

All our records are so different. *Hazards* definitely shows our ability to present something large in scope. Everybody plays the gamut of the instruments they play. There's some funky stuff, and there is some heavy prog-rock. It shows a lot of sides of us, but it's not too lighthearted.

Why change styles so much?

Just to be different and to progress. For this new album, Colin was approached to write a musical. His original thought was that what he was writing was going to be staged. But as he kept writing, he realized that wouldn't be possible, and it would probably live better on a record. Everyone listening can create their own scenarios in their head.

It's basically a return of the rock opera.

I love The Who's *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia* and Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, but this is a folk-rock opera, because its themes are based more on folk music. *Quadrophenia* is a rock record based on Pete Townsend's stories of suicide and other themes. Our album is set a long time ago in a place similar to Middle Earth.

It's a rarity to hear folk-rock playing on modern radio. Where do you think you fit into the rock-music landscape?

24 ERIE LIFE MAGAZINE | AUGUST 09



From left, John Moen, Jenny Conlee, Colin Meloy, Nate Query and Chris Funk, of The Decemberists.

I think we are definitely different. We are telling stories as opposed to writing songs from the first-person point of view. We could be put in the indie rock category, because our music is not super hard, and we play a lot of alternative instruments. You won't find us on straightforward commercial rock radio.

But you are steadily gaining recognition with continual coverage in magazines like *Rolling Stone* and appearances on late-night television. You even had a mock feud with Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*. How did that happen?

We were doing a music video for "O Valencia!" We were playing in front of a green screen, and we challenged our fans to create backgrounds for us, and we would pick the best one. At the same time, Colbert was doing a similar green-screen challenge. He had this segment, "Who's Riding My Coattails Now?" in which he said we were copying him. Colin wrote him and we challenged him to a guitar duel. Our guitar player went on *The Colbert Report* and got his ass kicked by Peter Dinklage, because Colbert "hurt" his hand. We were really excited [to reappear on the show this past April], because not a lot of bands get to perform on Colbert's show.

You played a slimmed-down version of "The Wanting Comes in Waves" on *Colbert*. Is it hard to break up *Hazards of Love* for live performances, since it is meant to be listened to all at once?

For the whole first leg of our tour, we would play the entire album in our first set. I like

the idea of people being able to sit, listen, and enjoy it. It feels less like a rock concert.

The band performed at a rally for Barack Obama during his campaign. Shortly afterward, some members of the conservative media tried to use your presence at the rally against him, saying your songs support treason and are anti-American.

At that point, Obama was doing so well in his campaign, the media was going at him from every angle they could. They claimed "The Decemberists are Russian." We like to celebrate the Russian culture. We are intrigued by it. We sometimes play the Soviet national anthem before our shows, but it's not like we are Communists. We chose to just say nothing to the media and let it blow over. Obama had no affiliation with us.

Colin has said he put himself all out there with *Hazards of Love*. What direction do you think the band will take for its next album?

I think we might do something stripped down and more conventional. We are in the very basic planning phases of the next album, so it's hard to say what it is going to be. But it is definitely not going to be another rock opera. ELM

— Mark Toriski

The Decemberists will be appearing at the Byham Theater in Pittsburgh on August 14.

For more information on the group, visit www.decemberists.com.

Photo courtesy of EMI Music Publicity.