



Burning Ambition

She's the arsy eccentric behind 2012's weirdest pop album, but, boy, is Beth Jeans Houghton Lumsy...

Words: Dan Stubbs Photograph: Paul Fearfield



ON 1ST JANUARY 2012, Beth Jeans

Houghton set herself on fire.

"You know when you're drinking from the bathroom tap and you tip your head to one side?" she says. "I did that, but I didn't notice the candle next to the sink. Next thing, my fur hat was on fire." In a great bit of sensible thinking for a walking flambe, Houghton first unlocked the door, then put the flames out. "The thing I'm bothered about is I'm very superstitious, and they say the way you spend New Year's Day is the way you'll spend the year. It was the worst New Year's Day I've ever had. Ever!"

Houghton has little reason to worry. Her debut album, *Yours Truly, Cellophane Nose* (named for a friend who put a sweet wrapper on her nose, in case you were wondering) is due for a February release and is pulling in glowing reviews for its lush ribbons of sound and towering psychedelia. Houghton is not yet buying into the hype. "I'm not even going to believe it's really coming out until I've seen it in the shops," she says.

Here's why Houghton is worried: the singer-songwriter first did the rounds of press, promotion and record company schmoozing four years ago, when her debut EP presented her as the most leftfield member of the nu-folk boom. Following umpteen false starts and four sacked managers ("People think I'm difficult to work with..."), she returns having chiselled out an album at a snail's

pace with Blur producer Ben Hillier, though she insists she's a prolific writer with material prepared for the next one too. Far from her acoustic origins, the debut LP bears the full-bodied brunt of backing band The Hooves Of Destiny, comprising three chaps in their late 20s and early 30s from Houghton's native Newcastle-Upon-Tyne.

Though Houghton is at pains to point out that the album is a group effort, this furiously creative individual informs its every fibre, from the lion-headed naked torsos on the cover to the freaky

lyrics within. Houghton's tumblr is a Rosetta Stone for her myriad obsessions, featuring pages of flamingos, Frank Zappa pictures and vintage Los Angeles glamour. We find Houghton in LA today, on the phone from upmarket Malibu, where she spent her recent

birthday ("22 – old age!") and plans to relocate permanently in 2012.

"I feel like I was born in the wrong place," she says. "And the wrong year."

Before then, there's lots of UK touring to be done. Gig-goers should come prepared for lots of audience participation: previous shows have seen Houghton leading the crowd in burping competitions.

"I like people to be quiet when I'm playing, but it makes me feel weird if they don't talk to me in between songs," she says. Better take heed. After all, she is known for being a bit of a hot head...

Yours Truly, Cellophane Nose is out now on Adze.

"People think I'm difficult to work with..."



Beth Jeans Houghton & The Hooves Of Destiny

'Yours Truly, Cellophane Nose' (MUTE)

★★★★



What the hell are "hooves of destiny"? And a "cellophane nose"? Are they folksy accoutrements like waistcoats and baggy brown cardigans? Probably best just to brush over Beth Jeans Houghton's dire taste in band names and album titles and focus instead

on the 21-year-old's musical talent, which is much more promising. We can't help but wish she'd hooked up with a different producer, though. Ben Hillier's done some stellar work with Blur, Elbow and Depeche Mode, but Houghton is the owner of a Vashti Bunyan-ish husky voice that dips and soars stunningly and is at its most affecting when surrounded by little, or no backing – such as on the gorgeous 'Dodecahedron' and the beginning of 'Liliputt' before it's drowned in layers of sound and jaunty rhythms. Hillier and Houghton have chosen, however, to smother the majority of these tracks in rattling drums, horns, strings, organs, guitars and banjos, and it strips the music of any emotion or intimacy and impedes our ability to actually connect with what Houghton's singing so sweetly about.

In a way, it's a shame that so much has been done to hide the delicacy of her voice. Then again, perhaps the point is this: as long as she's dressed as a zombie Dusty Springfield, and as long as she's madder than Antony Kiedis' most minimalist underpants, at least she'll spare us the dreariness of receiving the next "next Laura Marling" tag. That's one destiny, for sure, these hooves won't be trotting off to intercept.

CAMILLA PIA

DOWNLOAD 'DODECAHEDRON', 'NIGHTSWIMMER', 'LILIPUTT'