

## Beth Orton *The Ground Above*

For more than 30 years, Beth Orton has been our antenna to the cosmos, the poet laureate of forces too vast to take in all at once. Her records arrive patiently, unified by emotional focus rather than any single musical style. From the pioneering folktronica of 1996's *Trailer Park* to the earthy classic-rock miniatures of 2006's *Comfort of Strangers* through 2022's self-produced *Weather Alive*, she has built a catalogue that exists proudly out of time, each album its own planet in an ever-expanding solar system.

If *Weather Alive* lived underwater, spectral and dreamlike, *The Ground Above* marks a resurfacing. It is her most direct and unapologetic music to date; profoundly urgent, embodied, and powered by a hard-won strength. Where the previous record unfolded in a suspended dreamscape, *The Ground Above* finds Orton firmly back on land, taking a giant intake of air. It documents survival, integration and renewal without denial, acceptance without resignation.

"All the songs on the record are looking through the prism of the years from many directions at once," Orton says. "I'm working with the unconscious, something like lucid dreaming." The album represents independence and authorship, while being deeply collaborative at its core. Working with trusted musicians including multi-instrumentalists Shahzad Ismaily and Vernon Spring's Sam Beste, drummers Chris Vatalaro (Antibalas, Radiohead) Tom Skinner, bassist Tom Herbert, Guitarists Dave Okumu, Grey McMurry and Adrian Utley as well as Paul Butler (The Bees and Michael Kiwanuka) Orton reaches new heights as a producer, songwriter, singer, and bandleader.

Split into two distinct halves, *The Ground Above* offers a life-affirming reckoning with grief and love as parallel certainties. "What kept me alive, and sometimes nearly killed me, through most of my childhood and all the way through my early 30's was a kind of feral invincibility, barrelling through. I said yes to life, over and over again, embraced and devoured all that I could, propelled magnetically in a flying dream that didn't allow for time to catch up with me, except for when it did of course."

Orton says of the title track: "Love and grief are intrinsically linked. Eventually both come to stop you in your tracks, we are all vulnerable beings living out an invincible existence." The opening tracks arrive as direct transmissions from the subconscious – raw, searching, volatile – while the latter half settles into some of Orton's most timeless melodies, evoking Great American Songbook forms refracted through spiritual jazz and improvisation. Each song unfolds as a suite of moments, rooted in lived experience rather than nostalgia.

"Before I Knew," Orton reflects on the inheritance of history, "beliefs so deeply ingrained it's unclear where they arose from". The song was recorded largely live, its gentle landing belying its weight. On "Cigarette Curls," Orton draws from a formative early friendship. For the song's close, Beth helped sculpt a live hip-hop beat with her collaborators, layered with Nick Hakim's wordless harmonies, capturing both reckless abandon and sudden rupture.

Throughout the album, Orton navigates aging, motherhood and identity, ideas of ambiguous grief, political unease, acceptance and endurance, and the ongoing choice to stay — in love, in art, and in the world. "Waiting" is one of the record's most classically beautiful songs. "The song is a celebration of moving beyond the holding pattern fear keeps us in," Orton explains.

On “Celestial Light,” Orton reflects on mortality and the awe of being alive. “I think about death often, not always morbidly, more as a way of stripping life back to its essential nature,” she says. “This song is an ode to solitude, finding peace with the loved and the lost, promising myself I will jump back into the world again someday, maybe.”

“I’ll Miss You” hovers at the edge of rupture. It isn’t quite a breakup song, but it stands on the brink bracing itself for loss. The song lives in a moment where love is no longer enough if it requires self-abandonment. It is a quiet declaration; “that I can’t live with you if it means living in the dark”.

The world is already crowded with impassioned breakup anthems. “Love You Right” instead, chooses a different defiance. “It’s a song of choosing love over and over, relationships are not easy and the world is not made for kindness. We can make good our worlds in our relationships with others.”

As the world crashed ever deeper into political chaos during the making of the record, that urgency seeped into the music. *The Ground Above* does not offer solutions, but it insists on presence. It holds a belief in art as a personal revolution, one that asserts humanity, feeling, and connection when truth feels increasingly weightless.

Orton’s voice, long capable of speaking as much through silence as through sound, stretches even further here, moving from whispered incantation to primal howl. On “Otherside,” her singing takes on the very shape of the song’s emotion — a direct transmission of experience.

She likens it to the first song of the morning birds, a declaration of survival. “The birds are letting each other know they made it through the night,” she says, “Telling each other, ‘I’m still here.’” In that way, the song becomes both a witness and a message, an insistence that life, however raw or fleeting, persists and that there’s bravery in starting again each day, sometimes with each hour.

As with *Weather Alive*, Orton self-produced the album to foreground the collective spirit of the room, supported by collaborators whose emotional intelligence and generosity run through every note. Where the previous record felt like a ghostly conjuring, *The Ground Above* reaches outward, to connect, to insist on presence, to hold eye contact. It is about standing in earned strength, honouring what was, and building new ground beneath your feet as you step out into worlds where there is often no road map but the one you make step by step.