

Sarah-Jane Morris Honors Janis, Lennon, Others Via Fallen Angel

BY WAYNE HOFFMAN

NEW YORK—When Sarah-Jane Morris appeared as guest vocalist on the Communards' 1986 international smash cover of "Don't Leave Me This Way," she found fame overnight.

The British singer, who had previously been involved in political bands tackling such issues as a miners' strike and the Falklands war, was transformed by that song into a disco diva—a title she had never sought.

"You suddenly go from nobody knowing who the hell you are to everybody knowing," Morris says. "I thought I would love it, but I quickly realized it wasn't necessarily what I wanted."

Morris' latest album, *August*—due Nov. 26 in the U.K. on her independent Fallen Angel label—opens with a radical, acoustic reinterpretation of "Don't Leave Me This Way" that Communards fans might not recognize.

"I've done it as a blues song," says Morris. "I wanted to say, 'I'm not going to do the disco version you expect me to do. I'm going to put a new mark on it. I'm reclaiming it for myself.'"

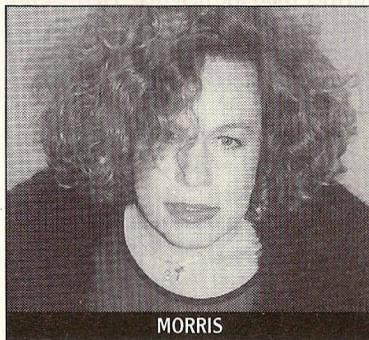
Morris puts her own mark on a dozen songs on *August*, almost all of them covers, from John Lennon's "Whatever Gets You Through the Night" to Marvin Gaye's "Mercy, Mercy Me" and Leonard Cohen's "Chelsea

Hotel." Marc Ribot—an American guitarist who has worked with Tom Waits and Marianne Faithfull—collaborated with Morris in selecting, arranging, and producing the tracks. Morris picked some of her favorite songs, and the duo created spare arrangements in the studio, recording the entire CD in three days without rehearsals.

"We tried to find something new that could be revealed from these old songs," explains Ribot, who is currently promoting his own solo guitar CD, Atlantic's *Saints*. "In many cases, we radically rearranged tunes. 'Don't Leave Me This Way,' for example, doesn't sound much like the [Communards' version], because in that version the melody was obscured by the fact that it was a disco tune."

With Ribot's guitar as accompaniment, *August* focuses on Morris' husky voice, which spans jazz, folk, and blues. Her raw, smoky sound closely resembles that of Janis Joplin—a fact that led to Morris being considered for the lead in a Joplin biopic. But after years of researching the part—including taking Texan dialect lessons—Morris was dropped from the project, which was later shelved altogether.

Rather than write off her years of work, Morris covered "Piece of My Heart" on *August* and wrote a song



MORRIS

called "Janis Joplin" for her next album, *Love and Pain*—comprising original songs performed with a full band, due next summer in Europe on Fallen Angel. "Once again, I buried a ghost by paying tribute to Janis."

Morris, who manages herself, plans to release a single to Britain's Radio 2, and she believes IRMA—the label licensing *August* in Italy—will also pick a single there, but neither is definite yet. Morris was shopping for a U.S. distribution deal this summer—even playing her first U.S. concert in 15 years at New York City's Bottom Line Sept. 6—but the Sept. 11 attacks changed this. "I stopped trying to push myself at a time when the country was so devastated." A few U.S. labels have expressed interest; she'll renew her efforts after the album's U.K. release.

Marc Copeland, who hosts the weekly *Jazz Influences* show on WFDU—a noncommercial station at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, N.J.—has been playing tracks from *August* and getting "good response," especially to "Piece of My Heart." In December, Copeland will broadcast an interview he taped with Morris during her recent New York visit. "This album has captured her

essence," he says. "Hopefully, this will introduce her to a wider audience."

Morris will tour in support of *August* across Europe through the spring and play festivals next summer in support of *Love and Pain*.

"My favorite thing is playing live," Morris says. "Making this Ribot album, experimenting and improvising, was the next best thing to playing live."