

"All along, I really wanted each song to be its own little world," says Fiona Apple. "Every song that I write, I feel like I'm in a different world. And with this album, because it's been such a long period of time, I didn't want everything to sound one particular way."

It's been a long and tangled road for Apple's stunning, intricate new album, *Extraordinary Machine*. But over the course of six years, multiple producers, business struggles, and life changes, she has maintained a clear sense of her musical vision—and returned with a collection of songs that reconfirms her place as one of the finest singer-songwriters of her generation. From the fragile music-hall lilt of the title track to the rollicking "Better Version of Me," from the fever intensity of "Not About Love" to the dreamy melancholy of "Oh Sailor," *Extraordinary Machine* reveals an artist with a sprawling, hard-fought range of emotions about love and identity, and with the musical palette to express them all. These are complicated songs for complicated sentiments.

Almost a decade has passed since Apple, now 28, astonished listeners with her 1996 debut, *Tidal*. It was almost impossible to believe that a voice and a style so fully-formed was coming from a performer who was so young. Spurred by the controversial video for "Criminal" and such hits as the evocative, flawless "Shadowboxer," *Tidal* sold over three million copies, landed her on the cover of numerous national magazines, and established Apple as a major new figure in pop music.

The 1999 follow-up, *When the Pawn Hits the Conflicts He Thinks Like a King What He Knows Throws the Blows When He Goes to the Fight and He'll Win the Whole Thing 'Fore He Enters the Ring There's No Body to Batter When Your Mind Is Your Might So When You Go Solo, You Hold Your Own Hand and Remember That Depth Is the Greatest of Heights and if You Know Where You Stand, Then You Know Where to Land and if You Fall It Won't Matter, 'Cuz You'll Know That You're Right* took Apple even further. Produced by Jon Brion (who has worked with artists from Aimee Mann to Kanye West), it was even more mature and realized than the debut, adding moods and tones to her unique, finely-wrought style. The platinum-selling *When the Pawn*...topped numerous critics' lists as the best album of the year.

When Apple finished touring, though, she wasn't immediately compelled to start writing again. "I had little bits and pieces of songs that will lie around forever unless somebody gives me a kick in the ass," she says. "I don't really worry about it when I don't feel creative, because it always happens in seasons. Since I started playing piano, there would always be a year or two when I wouldn't play at all. Or there would be an art season, where it's not about making music but about making art. But when I'm not in it, I'm not in it, and I believe it's just as important to have those spells in your life. Everything contributes to what you produce."

She was, however, having weekly lunches with producer Brion. "Every now and then he'd ask, 'Are you writing anything?'," she says. "And I'd say no and change the subject. And then one time he was like, 'I think enough is enough—for you and for me, I want to work on something again.'"

And so, in 2002, with the songs and song fragments that she had, they began sessions at Ocean Way studios. Eventually operations moved to the Paramour in LA's Silver Lake region, and they continued working into 2003. But Apple was having trouble finding the album she wanted to make. "Because I was kind of cajoled into doing it," she says, "I

didn't really know what I wanted to do. I started feeling panicky, like do I want to do this at all, be a part of this again? So I kind of mentally checked out of those sessions."

As Apple wrestled with her material, the next chapter in this saga unfolded when someone leaked the unfinished tracks to radio—after which they wound up on the Internet. "First it felt like somebody took my diary," Apple says. "And then I started thinking, now I'm never going to be able to do this the right way."

All the while, rumors were running rampant about the insidious reasons that this album wasn't being released. Apple has maintained all along, though, that such responsibility lies squarely with her. "The actual reason it didn't come out is that I wasn't satisfied with the way it was," she says. "I felt really bad because I wasn't really there to captain the ship. I didn't feel capable of doing it. So I left Jon to make all the decisions, and as a result it became more of a Jon Brion record. I still love that version of the album, I'm still proud of it, but I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I didn't at least try to get to a place where I could make my own decisions about it."

Following the Internet leak, everyone retreated to their corners and tried to determine how best to proceed. Apple spent her days watching Columbo reruns and pondering her future. She got as far as applying for an internship with an organization in upstate New York that does occupational therapy with children, incorporating the use of farm animals. "I was really almost to the point where I was going to have a completely different kind of life," she says. "I was starting to get excited about starting over and figuring out what else I can do." Eventually, though, she was able to return to the studio and finish what she had started.

The key that unlocked the project's final sessions was the arrival of producer Mike Elizondo. Best known as Dr. Dre's right-hand music man, Elizondo is also an in-demand session bassist who has played with everyone from Sheryl Crow to Ry Cooder—he had even contributed to *When the Pawn...* Elizondo had already presented some rough treatments for the new songs before the leak threw things out of kilter. "When he came in and played some of these skeletal tracks," Apple says, "I remember I was so excited, I called my dad. It made me feel so inspired. And I just know when things are right—I knew, this is how it's supposed to be, and finally it can happen the way it's supposed to happen."

And so, at last, the epic journey of *Extraordinary Machine* reached its conclusion. Even Fiona Apple, obviously not one who's easily satisfied, was delighted with the results. "There were a couple of things when I would go 'OK, it was worth all of the trouble to get to do it this way,'" she says. "The song 'Red Red Red' we totally took apart—it wasn't right on the first version, and I really wanted it to be right because that song is important to me, it really is exactly what goes on in my mind. Mike played his upright bass and I just went in and sang to that, and then it finally felt right. So OK, if it hadn't been for all this trouble, and I hadn't gotten myself into this mess, we would never have gotten that right."

One thing that never changed in all these years and all these configurations was the album's title—in fact, the title song is one of two tracks from the original Jon Brion sessions that remained on the album's final cut.

"'Extraordinary Machine' really says how I feel about myself," says Apple. "I like it when I write a song that if somebody were to ask me a question like, 'how do you feel

about yourself?' I could say, 'here.' I like songs that are like speeches or essays, that make a point very tidy and clear.

"I've always had this pet peeve," she continues, "it makes me physically ill when I see somebody looking at me with the worried eye. And I've gotten a lot of it my whole life—partly because, at any given time, I've always been the youngest person in the room. I always want to say to people, even when I'm not alright, I'm alright. My life has taken some pretty great turns, I've been through a lot, I've had some really low lows and some really high highs, but I get better all the time. Whatever people do to me or don't do to me, I want some credit here for being a pretty extraordinary machine. All these things you're trying to protect me from, I make something out of it. So I'm fine and please stop looking at me that way!"

A few other things remained intact through this album's long history, as well. The photograph on the cover is a picture that Apple took of a flower in her yard—"before we even started recording," she says, "I went, 'oh, that's what the cover is going to be.'" She adds that the sly, affirming "Waltz"—a testament to resisting pressure and staying in the moment—was the first song she wrote for this project, and that "I always knew it was going to be the last song on the album, even when I didn't know if I was going to have an album."

Not surprisingly, Apple expresses some apprehension about getting back into the touring cycle, but says she's excited to reconnect with the songs from her first two albums. "I love the idea of applying them to my life now, and I also love being able to dip back into where I was then," she says. At a recent performance at Largo, her favorite LA hang-out, Elizondo asked if she'd sing "I Know," When the Pawn... 's intimate, powerful closing song. "Man, did I go into an emotional place!," she says. "Everything takes on a new meaning and you can still feel the old meaning. It's really a great, alive feeling."

So what has Fiona Apple learned from the making of *Extraordinary Machine*? She's gained perspective on just where her music fits into her life. She's seen the passion and loyalty of her fans. From all the twists and turns this phase of her life has taken, she's learned, in the end, something like maturity—at least, her own, free-spirited version. "It all just proves that you can grow up and be a happier person and make good things," she says. "You don't have to suffer for it all the time. It's not like my inner basket case is absent, it's just that I've lived with it long enough that I can manage it now."

"I've had a surprisingly Zen feeling about this whole thing," she says. "I kind of always knew that it would work out somehow."