Spotlight Review of Freakwater’s *Thinking of You* LP, published in *No Depression #59,* September 10, 2005

By *No Depression* co-founder Bill Friskics-Warren

As the one-sheet that describes the new Freakwater album attests, the group indeed employs a more dappled sonic palette – brass, pump organ, violins (instead of fiddles) – here than they have on previous records. Still, the burst of guitar feedback that opens the third song on the discs initially reminded me not of new sounds but of the B-side of Freakwater’s very first single, a cover of Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs” that they released just as the United States was preparing for its 1991 attacks in the Persian Gulf. As the conflagration that ignites the new track gives way to bettersweeet acoustic guitars and harmonies, though it’s obvious that the song called “Buckets of Oil” isn’t a new version of “War Pigs”. More like its second coming, and just as free of cheek.

“Buckets of oil / buckets of wine/To grease up these gears and shut down my mind,” Catherine Irwin begin her wincing alto leavened by Janet Bean’s dulcet harmonies. “Buckets of nails, truckloads of blood/To float this ship of fools out of the mud.” So continue the two women, before getting down to the nitty gritty of George Bush’s blood-for-oil diplomacy and that of his father before him.

Invoking images of amber waves of grain and purple mountains majesty (the latter are likened to so many purple-heart medals shining on a “sad hill of (soldiers’ graves”), Irwin and Bean sing of a not-so-beautiful America upon which the face of God doesn’t shine and the “yellow rose will rise for the father and for the son.” Alluding to both to the celebrated flower of the Bushes’ home state and to the cowardice of the two Presidents, Irwin and Bean paint a nation “Where the winners and the losers from sea to shining sea / Have been bought and sold and most often had for free.” Meanwhile, the susurrus of feedback (compliments of co-producer Tim Rutili and Califone) comes creeping back, eventually drowning out everything around it, much like the fundamentalist humbug of the Bush administration.

It might seem like the neo-Appalachian country-rockers have suddenly gone political on us. But this barbed greeting card to the Bushes and our slumbering nation (on the CD’s cover, the words “Thinking of You” are cast in roses and flames against a backdrop of a deceptively placed sea) is utterly in keeping with what Freakwater has always been about since the beginning. Witness “Ugly Man” and “Waitress Song”, a pair of not-so-happy-go-lucky rambles from the 90’s that say as much about the hegemony of patriarchy as the dissertations of most any second- or third-wave feminists. Or “Louisville Lip”, Irwin’s aggrieved lament for Muhammad Ali and the time he threw his gold medal into the Ohio River when a “Loserville” restaurant refused to serve him because he was black. Even the band’s theology is political; the line “There’s nothing so pure as the kindness of an atheist” is as bracing and prophetic as the best Liberation Theology.

Even before Steve Earle got his consciousness raised, or before Jay Farrar of Jeff Tweedy discovered Woody Guthrie, Irwin and Bean were singing the body politic. It just that the two women (especially Irwin) plumb life and death through narrative and evocation rather than through slogans, self-mythologizing or mythopoeia. Their new album contains plenty of studies in miniature - from “Cathy Ann”, a wrenching meditation on the death of one of Guthrie’s daughters (Cathy Ann is a variant of Irwin’s given name), to “Hi Ho Silver”, where Irwin assails cheap grace and other palliatives – most of them opening into wider horizons. Indeed, fifteen years on, Freakwater continues to make profoundly lovely, humanistic records that confront the brokenness and gainsay the bad faith pervading our world, not the least of which are certain arrogant, hypocritical elements in the United States.