



ELENI MANDELL

Teenagers. Those punk kids are nothing but trouble. Except when they help you write and record a great album.

Myriad forces influenced Eleni Mandell in the making of her seventh full-length *Artificial Fire*: A long trek via two-lane, tree-lined highways through Oregon and Northern California; a dear friend with a hard-to-find shoe size; a pile of vintage T-shirts at a flea market. But an even bigger factor was the grownup artist getting back in touch with her Inner Teenager.

That youngster has been popping up a lot lately. You'll see her tearing up the floor when Mandell slaps "Jessie's Girl," the Cars, and Yeah Yeah Yeahs' "Maps" on the stereo, and throws one of her living room dance parties. And she is a prime source of the enthusiasm coursing through these fifteen new originals, crafted by Mandell with assistance from her regular band—guitarist Jeremy Drake, bassist Ryan Feves, and drummer Kevin Fitzgerald—and co-producer Dave Trumfio.

"I just wanted a change," says Mandell. "I wanted to feel like I was in the band of my teenage dreams." She wanted more electric guitar, and a beat that audiences could move to. "I want people to hear this record and have fun, more of a good time."

Her band, that youthful dream turned adult reality, is a more tightly knit unit than ever before. Feves keeps her laid back, while Fitzgerald stokes her work ethic. "We're not a perfect family, but we're damn close," the songwriter admits. Especially since the addition of Drake, referred to them by Nels Cline (Wilco), who'd played on 2007's *Miracle of Five*. "Jeremy was the missing link," says Mandell. "We were all in a past life together."

The musical range displayed on *Artificial Fire* will not astonish anyone familiar with Mandell's back catalog. There are moments of AM radio bliss buoyed by golden brass ("The Right Side"), a rolling bank of atmospheric "space fog" ("I Love Planet Earth"), and even touches of '60s mysticism ("God Is Love"). Spirited rockers abound, from the spiky title tune to "Bigger Burn," right up to the explosive kiss-off ("Cracked") that closes the program. The Inner Teenager and her memories of a first kiss permeate "It Wasn't The Time (It Was the Color)," while a more mature, flirtatious Mandell surfaces on "In The Doorway" and the seductive slow dance "Tiny Waist."

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In past, Mandell has divvied her varied musical impulses across different records: The Nashville-tinged *Country for True Lovers* (2003), her jazz *EP Maybe, Yes* (2004), and her pop-rock outings with the Grabs. But this time, all her styles coexist comfortably on one cohesive album. Credit, she insists, must be shared with Jeremy, Ryan, and Kevin. "I've always loved and trusted them as musicians, but I'd never witnessed songs come to life like this before. Our rehearsals were inspiring."

"Sharing that epiphany with three other people was like the same sort of excitement that I felt when I was a kid, and my father taught me to print photographs," adds Mandell. "It was like putting the paper in the developer, and watching this picture emerge."

For making *Artificial Fire* gel as a whole, she also tips her hat to another contributor. "The complete integration really happened with Steve Fisk, who was hired to mix the record, but did so much more. I loved working with him. He's so musical, and did a fabulous job."

Raised in the Valley, Eleni Mandell has spent much of her life as an active member of the diverse Los Angeles music scene. In addition to her solo material, she also writes and performs with The Grabs (which features players from Blondie and Silversun Pickups), and is one-third of The Living Sisters (along with Inara George and Becky Stark; listen closely, and you'll hear the former singing backup on "The Right Side" and "Don't Let It Happen").

Since reconnecting with her Inner Teenager helped craft this album, one wonders: What would the intermediate Eleni Mandell, the woman who debuted with *Wishbone* in 1999, the songwriter that critics imagined starring in some shadowy film noir, make of her contemporary counterpart? This cheery lady who says her new approach to life is "not worrying"?

"I think she'd be happy," concludes Mandell. "My early writing was so much about being sad, and in turmoil, or angry. My younger self would be pleased that I decided to have fun and bring a lot of joy to the music." The Inner Teenager may be its muse, but *Artificial Fire* is no adolescent pity party. These days, Eleni Mandell's take on melancholy or angst, like all her other emotions, is disarmingly well adjusted.

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