



BY JOAN ANDERMAN | *The Boston Globe*

Rachael Yamagata is the sort of surprise music critics live for: a young unknown, performing for a couple dozen people in a tiny club in the middle of the week, who bowls you over with her bountiful gifts. It was one of those shows that dares a writer to match the musician for ingenuity and imagination, and inspires a critic to shine a light on an artist who isn't likely to get much attention from the mainstream press.

She bares her soul with beautiful sounds

BROKENHEARTED GIRLS WHO SING beautiful songs from behind curtains of hair are a genre unto themselves. The trick (no small one) is to make your journal entry stand out from all the others — to somehow get your loser ex-boyfriends and melancholy chords and particular pathos to sound more complicated and gorgeous and depressing than those belonging to the next guitar-strumming, keyboard-pumping waif.

If the suits don't get to her first, Rachael Yamagata — a young singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist who played a brief but riveting show at the Paradise Lounge on Thursday — is ready to set herself apart. She's endowed with a deep, natural instrument, a wild weed of a voice that pushes up through the cracks in a song.

The songs, too, are forceful and fertile, ranging from chamber delicacies and art-pop epics to tender ballads and rock tunes. The distracting similarities to Fiona Apple that plague "Hap-penstance," Yamagata's debut album for RCA, were far fewer in the live setting, where Yamagata roughed up her repertoire with blissfully frayed edges and a four-piece band (drums, guitar, cello, violin) that eschewed stock loveliness

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for sweet, strange noises.

It's hard to say exactly why we believe some artists and not others. Maybe it's the unvarnished soulfulness of Yamagata's singing, or her disastrous clothing ensemble, or the way her face followed her melodies into surprising shapes. But where so many napkin scribbles drown in their own precious poetry, songs like "Be Be Your Love," "Letter Read," and "Meet

Me By the Water" were mysteriously unaffected, even as they reached for emotional and musical significance.

Danger lurks, however, and it reared its ugly head in the form of "Worn Me Down." Sandwiched between fistfuls of Yamagata's dark, gracious ruminations, the song was a shocking confection, a connect-the-dots pop single that reeked of label interference and sucked the cool vibe straight out of the room. And she should know better. "Paper Doll," a tender tune delivered in a defiant rasp, frets about her record company's efforts to style her.

Yamagata's been worn down by love, that's for sure. But better that than the demands of the marketplace. At least the faithless lovers are good for a few songs. Here's hoping Yamagata can hang on to her formidable musical soul in the face of what will surely be mounting commercial pressures.

The thin drawl that tumbles out of baby-faced singer-songwriter Jonathan Rice is reminiscent of the New York musician's hero, Bob Dylan. So are Rice's rustic, elegant folk-rock songs, which managed to travel great distances in the space of a few chords during his opening set.