



Jewel

Spirit

11/1998

Atlantic Records

Jewel's *Spirit*

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"All people want is to be touched. They don't care if it's Celine Dion or Meat Loaf or me."
— Jewel, Rolling Stone

The year Jewel's album, *Spirit*, came out, I was in ninth grade, and transitioning into life at boarding school. I was learning to blow-dry my hair and put on makeup, and Jewel was twenty-one, navigating the life of a famous musician. What she lacked in being edgy, hip, or cool, she gained in being earnest and sincere. She kept her crooked tooth; she wrote her own lyrics; she lived with her mother.

That Christmas, my mom gave me *Spirit*—the square case poked out of my stocking, and when I opened it, I was thrilled. I was starting to discover that Jewel wasn't "cool," but I wasn't yet at the point where I couldn't embrace her music because of it, at least privately. I wouldn't have told any of my friends it was one of my favorite presents, but then again, they probably weren't telling me about their actual wants and desires either: we were fourteen, only two years past twelve, only four years past ten, and yet those years made a world of difference in what we were allowed to want.

As soon as the first line of the first song played, I was following Jewel, and I was following her eagerly, as a kind of guide not just to her interior world, but my own. "Deep Water," the first song on the album, starts— "you find yourself falling down/your hopes in the sky/But your heart like grape gum on the ground." Her voice was welcoming and comforting. As she sang "you find yourself," I could feel she didn't mean herself, but someone she was imagining, someone far off, and I obviously thought it was me. What is adolescence if not a continual "falling down?"

My first collapse happened on the first day of school. To welcome the boarding students, there was a picnic on the quad, and I wore sweatpants because I thought it made me look like I wasn't trying too hard. When I realized my mistake, I combatted my embarrassment with brash behavior—I walked over to a boy I thought was cute and asked him to be my friend. After, there were numerous missteps: I let a senior in my dorm pluck my eyebrows, which I subsequently ruined when I tried to maintain them. I talked a lot about sex I'd never had, and I said "oh yea, I loved that part" when people talked about Chris Farley's performance in an SNL skit I'd never seen. Luckily, I had enough social sense to protect what I really thought when I saw myself in the mirror, lipstick on, hair straightened, missing most of my eyebrows: *I am a fraud, and I want to go home.*

Over the winter break, I allowed myself to indulge in *Spirit*, going up to my bedroom at night and listening to the entire album, over and over. Every song spoke to a kind of strength in vulnerability, an emotion I was not only learning to keep at bay, but an emotion I was also desperate to harness, in the right way. Like most teenagers, I was full of emotions; like most teenagers, I thought I was the only one; like most teenagers, I wanted to make sure I did it all *the right way*. Listening to Jewel was not necessarily the right way, but she allowed me to channel my emotions in ways that felt right to me.

In my transition to boarding school, I was dealing with some dissonance—where I had always seen myself as mature for my age, I suddenly felt childish and innocent. The people I met smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol. They cheated on tests. They had already touched penises. They stole from stores at the mall. They were advanced in ways I wanted to be, and in ways I thought I had plenty of time to become. I was disappointed it was all happening so fast, and when it came to romance, I wanted the kind Jewel was talking about in “Kiss the Flame,” the kind that hinted at physical intimacy, but didn’t focus on it; the kind that spoke of love as a way of being brave, the kind that lead to transformation and belonging. Yes, I thought, as I sang along to the song, yes, please—“show me one man who knows his own heart- to him I shall belong.” Perhaps it wasn’t what she described, but that she described it at all: she was direct in a way I was finding hard to come by.

After her first album, *Pieces of Me*, Jewel said she was embarrassed. She said it felt like an airing of dirty laundry, and she wasn’t proud of the work. With a quick listen to both *Pieces of Me* and *Spirit*, one could argue that she didn’t change very much from one to the next. In some ways, the albums are incredibly similar, at least lyrically in that they are focused on sentiment and emotion. A closer look, however, you can see a slight shift—in the first, the emotion has gotten the best of her, and in the second, her emotions are something she owns and embraces, and her desires become central to her strength.

Even so, I haven’t gone back to the album since: it is not a great album—it doesn’t have a beautiful arc or dive into complexity, and some lyrics, like “your heart like grape gum on the ground,” make me laugh. That’s not why I hid the fact that I liked it, though, and it doesn’t explain why I never shared my love for it with anyone else. I didn’t share it because Jewel was a joke to most people, and I knew it was not “cool” to like Jewel in the same way it was not “cool” to be sincere about one’s emotions. The coolest thing you could do at fourteen was to joke about everything, and so when “Hands” would come on the radio, I’d do what everyone else did: laugh and sing, “these hands are small I know/but they’re not yours, they are my own” with a smile, putting my hands out in front of my face and pretending to sing to my *precious, little fingers*, using every ounce of irony I could muster. I likely went above and beyond to make it clear I was not a Jewel fan because I was. After all, that’s the first rule of shame: hide it behind visible disgust.

And yet, there was Jewel, gathering up herself, and putting herself out there, even though her first album embarrassed her, even though many critics were harsh—her music was too maudlin, too sentimental, too cheesy. Certainly every artist is tasked with creating amidst criticism, but if it was me at twenty-one, I would have looked at a peer like Fiona Apple and thought: she’s the real rockstar. Then, I would have packed up my stuff, and gone home.

In many moments of my ninth grade year, I wanted to go home. I wasn’t just comparing myself to people that seemed more advanced, but I was also comparing myself to those that seemed smarter than me, people who wore their intellect like a cloak. Somehow, they knew just what to read, to listen to, to see. When *American Beauty* came out, they knew it was an impressive film; when it came to music, it was Lauryn Hill whose album rocked their worlds. I wanted to be a part of their club, even though I knew I was actually a part of Jewel’s club, one full of longing, one with the gall to beg: “take these stars from my crown/Let the years fall down/Lay me out in firelight/Let my skin feel the night/Fasten

me to your side/And say it'll be soon/You make me so crazy, baby/Could swallow the moon/swallow the moon."

I wanted to feel that crazy, and I wanted to make those requests. I wanted to be "fastened" to someone's side, but I was learning quickly that I could not admit that to anyone, let alone those who I wanted to be fastened to the most. In some ways, I feel badly for how I treated Jewel's album: I went to her to learn what I needed to reject. I used her, I indulged in the music, and then I pretended like I didn't know who she was. All the while, Jewel knew exactly who she was and she embraced it. It never really occurred to me I had that option.

Even if *Spirit* didn't help me become a confident teenager, I saw myself in it. In the album, I saw a person attempting to grapple with feelings of disappointment, longing, and desire, and I saw a woman writing her way through her experience, trying to figure it all out. I was in an environment where we were being educated not just to have proper grammar but to also have good taste, and yet I couldn't help but wonder if the focus on quality was an effort to hide behind experience, to steel ourselves against the kind of feelings that Jewel wasn't afraid to express. I was glad to have Jewel as a different kind of guide, as perhaps a more immediate instructor in matters of the heart, even if I didn't exactly know what that meant. Sure, I could see that Shakespeare was guiding me in *Romeo and Juliet*, but it was Jewel's reference to the play in "Kiss the Flame" that resonated with me: "And wherefore art thou, Romeo?/Where have all the brave men gone?" I never knew if there had ever been brave men to begin with, but it sounded right and good and true at the time, and I wanted them to come back, whoever they were.

The Jewel who made *Spirit* is no longer the Jewel who made *Spirit*. Her recent album, *Picking up the Pieces*, harkened back to her first album, *Pieces of You*, the one she denounced soon after it came out, the one she tried to turn away from when she created *Spirit*. And yet the form of *Picking up the Pieces* itself is a return, as a critic said, "to her roots."

I am no longer the fourteen year old who loved *Spirit*, but I am interested in the question of roots, and the kind of tree my fourteen-year-old self was building when she took comfort in Jewel. I'm at times as embarrassed of her as I was to be her, and yet, I can't discount her. In the same way Jewel returned to *Pieces of You*, I return to my ninth grade self, who was absorbed in herself but also stuck within it, desperately looking for a voice to give meaning to her discomfort, confusion, and desire. I can't claim there was no one else but Jewel who could have provided that voice, but it's in the looking back that I can see why it was the voice I needed and craved. In her words: "come on you unbelievers/move out of the way."