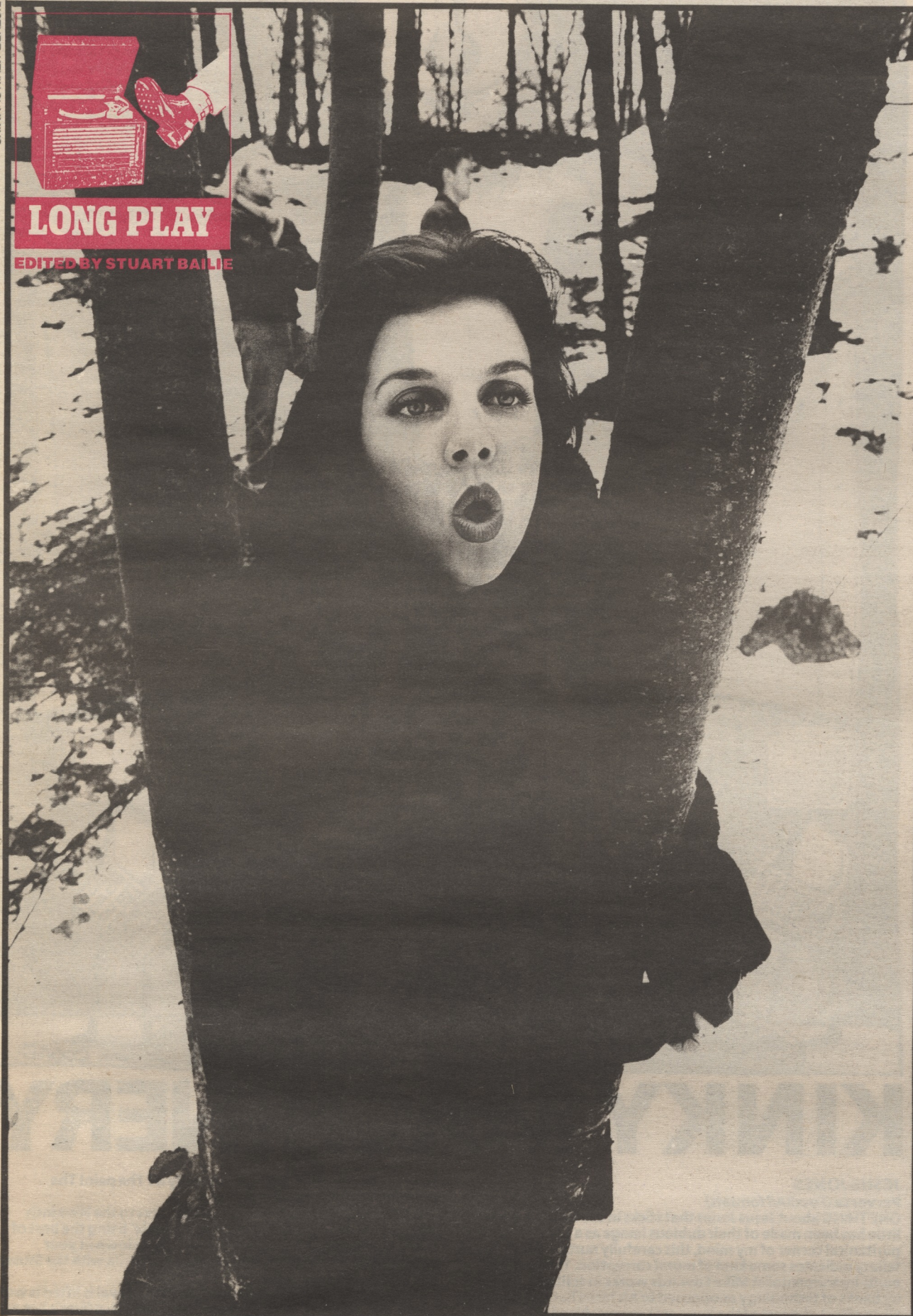


ALTERNATIVE ULCER

PICTURE: KEVIN CUMMINS



BELLY

Star (4AD/All formats)

BELLY HAVE come to haunt you.

Of course, they're an unapologetic *pop* group, wielding harmless ephemera like brassy guitars and rattling tunes, but they're still going to cause you a fair bit of disquiet. 'Star', a 15-track opus that sticks nine new(ish) songs next to a re-worked handful of tunes from Belly's first three EPs, finds Tanya Donnelly venting the pop sensibilities that were occasionally allowed to surface during her time with Throwing Muses. But underpinning most of its contents is a doomy outlook that leads to much of this album sounding like the product of an afternoon at the analyst's. Things aren't as overtly angst-infused as the work of half-sister Kristin, but there's darkness lurking here, without a doubt.

Among other things, Tanya likes singing about childhood. Not the idyllic time of holiday snaps, trips to the zoo and school sports days, mind – rather the moments that rear their heads in nightmares and fairy tale fantasies. It's the same stuff that the Brothers Grimm (a Donnelly literary fave, apparently) seized on for their stories – and it rears its head here in the way that Tanya's innocent and – yes! – childlike vocals twist their way around songs that describe all manner of character-forming trauma.

Kids from bad homes come over to her house and decapitate all her dolls; she's haunted by witches and strange people carrying decomposing dogs on their back; and, in 'Feed The Tree', you'll find a recollection of a gory incident in which Tanya the toddler crashed her bike down the stairs and lost her teeth. It's the standard stuff of most childhoods, but this album manages to couch it in terms that lend it an air of real importance.

Trouble is, dealing in such subject matter, especially when you drench songs like 'Someone To Die For' and 'Low Red Moon' in eerie, pseudo-cinematic musical touches, is likely to carry on dangerously close to that perfumed corner of the student common room marked "Goth". Tanya doesn't escape – '... Moon', in particular, is hammed-up enough to sound like something from the cider-and-black subculture – and there's a clutch of other occasions when 'Star' descends into transparently forced play-acting.

Thankfully, she usually sounds sincere – and even if Freud-rock isn't your scene, you can bypass the lyrical themes of many of these tunes and focus instead on the fact that they're *pop songs*. Sure, things like 'Angel' and 'Dusted' have got the frayed, pseudo-nightmarish overtones that are this album's mainstay, but they're sufficiently full of airbrushes, tuneful touches to simultaneously make them sound almost breezy. And if you really want to lighten up and dance about a bit, you can put on infectious frugalongs like 'Gepetto', the celebratory-sounding 'Slow Dog' and 'Feed The Tree'. There's ample 'isn't-life-wonderful' fun to be had listening to these songs – providing you leave the lyric sheet on the other side of the room.

Still, it's impossible not to sit down and get lost in 'Untogether', a wondrous acoustic trawl through revenge-hungry nastiness which has the same tragic quality as Morrissey's 'I Know It's Gonna Happen Someday', Buffalo Tom's 'Taillights Fade', Juliana Hatfield's 'Ugly' or any of the yearning slowies we've thrilled to in the last 12 months. It sounds like the perfect closing track, but that role is filled by 'Stay', a delicate weepie that bows out in an uncomfortably theatrical fashion.

Tanya Donnelly is a shining talent who's ever-so-slightly plagued by a liking for overblown melodrama. Four or more plays of 'Star', however, and you'll forgive her. This is a rare thing; a pop album that's streaked with themes that are usually the preserve of art-rock bores. You can put it on while you make breakfast, bounce around to it before you go out and *still* save it for soul-searching moments in the wee hours.

And how many records can you say that about? (8)

John Harris