

# The Soul of Cat Power

## A Ghost Story in Twelve Short Chapters

BY GREGG LAGAMBINA • PHOTOGRAPHY BY HANNA LIDEN

### CHAPTER 1.

This might be a ghost story.

It's only the two of us here, in this place. The moon is almost full—gibbous I think they call it. High up and bright, being harassed by fast moving clouds, the light falls across the glass table in stutters, as if the moon were a loose old motorcycle headlamp being knocked about by a bumpy path. There are leaves in the darkened pool, the patio umbrellas are tied up in bundles, and every window of the hotel behind us is black—those same clouds racing across them in reverse. It rained yesterday, so the air seems thick. Maybe if one of us jumped we could linger up in it for a moment, held by whatever damp thing is hanging about us, moving through us, grazing a cheek, lifting up a mint leaf out of the ice and over the rim of our short-glass mojitos. We look each other in the eye, clink our cocktails together, and bang them at once back onto the table in memory of those who can't be with us here, and lift them again to our mouths, taking in the mixture of rum, cane, soda water and lime. But I'm the only one who hears it. A woman's voice whispering, "There's a song in this place."



## CHAPTER 2.

The first time I see her she's a smile and a wave from the open door of a yellow cab. Chan Marshall, Cat Power, fittingly maritime in her gold-buttoned blue blazer, grey sweatshirt, blue jeans and white boating shoes. Miami, South Beach. As the driver taps the wheel, Chan bites a fingernail and runs down a half-dozen options for our destination, offering new choices the whole ride as we eventually head toward the dark, modern Japanese place where she's greeted with hugs and wide smiles from two hostesses and a pair of waiters. We reject a table offered in the corner by a fire exit. Actually, I reject it and she looks uneasy as we head to the opposite corner, where she sits facing the rest of the room. She laughs lightly as we settle in and says, "I've never done this before. I've never sat facing all these people."

At her request, I'm not to record a word this evening. She prefers to "work through" this first meeting so any official interview later won't be with a total stranger. A green bamboo cylinder full of dry, cold sake arrives, we pour out two drinks into the matching wood cups. Here she taps me on the shoulder, holding her sake in mid-air telling me to look her in the eyes. We cheer each other and she brings the cup down with a sound to the table and says, "To those who can't be with us" and swallows it back. "I learned that in Greece," she says.

## CHAPTER 3.

"Look, it's almost like the clouds are the thing and that dark cloud is actually the exit. You know what I mean? Like it's actually going through it—the light and everything else—as if the moon were a façade. But it's just not true."

This is not easy. Something's changed since last night. Chan Marshall is looking up at the moon as we both try to figure out if it's full or not. I'm telling her about people I know who think we never actually went there, to the moon; that the whole thing was staged in a television studio back in the '60s. I'm trying to find anything to talk about other than her or her music. When I come close to moving the conversation around to Memphis, where she recorded her new album *The Greatest*—or ask her about playing with Al Green's guitarist Mabon "Teenie" Hodges—her pauses become so lengthy, her sighs so pronounced, her unease so contagious, that I look around this desolate place for anything else to draw her attention to, to bring her back, to get her on my side. It's not easy.

"It's nice to look at," she says, again about the moon. "There are people that don't notice it. Haven't you found that?"

## CHAPTER 4.

There's raw fish on black plates in front of us and she's telling me about a dream she had involving Icarus and Johnny Cash. She wears two rings on her wedding finger. One looks vintage, the gold turned a bit brassy, detailed with what look like leaves or small wings. The other is silver and seemingly speckled with tiny diamonds. She tells me with a laugh that the silver one she bought on a whim to "marry myself," the other one is somehow connected to a dream she had where Johnny Cash was telling her of a child named "Ica...Ica...Ica..."—the name frustratingly left incomplete, as often happens in the murk of dreams. "He looked so handsome," she says, of the Cash in her reverie.

She spotted the ring one afternoon, soon after the dream—the gold one with the leaves or wings, the person in the shop

mentioning in passing something about the mythology of Icarus. It's at that moment she realizes what Johnny Cash was trying to say. She buys the ring because she has to.

"He was a mortal on earth," she says, playing with the ring now. "We come from similar places." Whether she's speaking of Icarus or Johnny Cash or both is anyone's guess. We pour more sake.

## CHAPTER 5.

There's music now. It's Michael Jackson. "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" is on the wind, carried over from a nearby building where you can hear people in the thrall of a party, audibly enthused by the song turned up loud enough now for us to hear from our dark, abandoned resort. It's from a building far away with one light on now—a single yellow square in all this blue dark.

"They should do a Broadway *Thriller*. It would be so amazing. That's a fucking great record. It's so...physical."

It's finally time to ignore to moon. The music we hear reminding us why we're here, to find a way to talk about why she's here, to figure out some safe approach to the inside of the spirit that makes her songs, without disrupting her or whoever else is here whispering on the air, haunting us into these long silences. It's time to move carefully back to the subject of Memphis and to the new music she'd rather let speak for itself. It's time to try again, at least.

There's a song on *The Greatest* called "Living Proof" that moves along the immovable rhythm of Dave Smith's bass and the percussion of Steve Potts, both session players with deep credits in the deep south, laying down the most architectural music Cat Power has ever made. It moves in one direction, it sighs and laments, but she's held up now, she has hands reaching down to keep her in the circle of the song. It's spiritual. Spiritual in the way church is supposed to be, with pews filled to overflowing with worshippers holding each other up, gathering each other on their way up to God.

On the song, she sings, "You're supposed to have the answer/You're supposed to have living proof/Well I am your answer/I am living." It seems a particularly apt sentiment, here in this light, where she's nervously tapping her Zippo on the glass tabletop, the silver lighter emblazoned with a black sketch of Bob Dylan. She is filling up again with resistance, aware of where we're headed. She puffs up her cheeks and lets out an exasperated sigh. She looks away and speaks in the other direction. I move the recorder closer, by an inch or two, careful to catch her thoughts without disrupting the moment. I'm only aware of three lights now—that yellow window up there, that moon, and now this small red light on the tape player which couldn't be any more intrusive if it were a Miami cop capturing us in the beam of his flashlight. I end up asking how someone so shy could be so courageous in her music. I ask her if what she is perceived as by her fans has any relationship to who she actually is. She's still looking the other way, tapping.

"You are physically doing something," she finally says. "Like a language...you know how people might read a poem and dance? It's like that. It doesn't have any definition. A lot of definition comes into it, as far as speculation or judgment to create this sort of person who is doing that. Sometimes you want to defend that element that isn't definable. It's a human element. It's regular. It's normal. It's regular."

I ask her if she feels any burden to represent the people that so deeply identify with her and her music. A burst of her laughter is followed by another deep silence. She looks at me sideways. I say, "Or are you only representing yourself and other people just iden-



She said it like a mantra, almost to remind herself that all was not lost that second evening.

tify with it?" She hits her leg three times with her fist and answers me again, facing in the opposite direction.

"There's no way I can represent anything else," she says, and pauses at length before turning back to face me. "You're asking me this major fucking question and you know that you're doing it."

"Lots of people take your music very personally..."

"What do you mean?"

"There are people that like your music who feel like they might be the only person that understands where you're coming from. Do you feel any obligation to these people?"

She calms a bit and smiles and says to the table, "Do I care about people? Yes. I do. I care about people. But am I representing them? Am I actually thinking that? No. Am I actively thinking, 'Oh, I'm gonna represent these people!' No, I'm not actively doing that. But do I have compassion and emotions and consciousness? Yeah, I think that's pretty regular. I don't think it's such a bizarre mishap. I think it's the normal reality of people who have the advantage of seeing it or learning it..." And she trails off.

"Then what does it represent?" I ask this, for some reason feeling the need to keep hammering on this thought until it is fully dead, knowing that it may lead nowhere. Or to somewhere worse. "You're spending the better part of your life making these songs, working at them, refining them, gathering up the courage to share them with the world, to perform them all over the world, so it must mean something to you. Why do you do it? Are you sharing yourself with us, or is it something else entirely?"

Surprisingly, she answers almost immediately for the first time all evening.

"That's a good question. It's a very hard question. I think it's just the collective, distorted reality of life. I think everybody has that. Or does that. It's a part of life."

The clouds spread apart into a wide opening and the moon gets even brighter. She turns back to tap an ash from her cigarette. She has tears in her eyes.

I hear a woman's voice whisper, "Don't be mad at me."

## CHAPTER 6.

She admits she has a bit of a crush on Leonardo DiCaprio. She thinks *The Aviator* was a great film. She saw DiCaprio once, in person, she said he was much taller and much bigger than she'd imagined him to be. She thinks he's handsome. I tell her I'm currently obsessed with Warren Oates, the actor most famous for his films with Sam Peckinpah, but she jumps right in with a mention of *Cockfighter*, a little seen film from 1974 where Oates stars as the mute-by-choice wrangler of roosters. She also says she just watched *Last Tango in Paris* the other night. She has impeccable taste.

We're on our second bamboo carafe of sake. We're still tapping cups and slamming them down (a bit harder now) in memory of whomever. The room is full and loud. She seems perfectly fine to be facing them all, her back to the corner for a change. She's happy. We start talking about Miami, a place I admit I couldn't seem to picture her living in. She says something about not being able to hide as well in New York, where she also lives. She can be here and not feel the pull of going out every night; that her friends here are from way back, so there's less pressure to make more elaborate plans than just spending time talking.

Before I flew to Miami, I was told she might have to go to Mexico for a week and that I might have to meet her down there instead. I ask her about that trip and why she postponed it. She smiles and looks up at me through her brown bangs, a bit of a sly smile revealing some teeth. She starts talking about how "they"

don't understand that sometimes you just want to "be" and not be "about" whatever they think your record is and how it should be spoken of and shared and how they are behind their desks saying, "OK, you're in Miami. We can have such and such a person come there and do this and that." She says that kind of situation makes you say to them, "I actually might have to go to Mexico that week."

"And then you hear that I can actually meet you in Mexico too," I say, getting it now.

"Yeah." She laughs.

Chan Marshall tried fleeing to Mexico, as a fugitive from *me*. When she realized there was no escape, she stayed put, here in Miami, where we are actually having—what seems to me—a good time. Certainly not worth a hastily packed suitcase, an overnight airplane and a handful of lies.

The waiter comes over with a plate full of desserts we didn't order, he gestures back toward the hostess who waves as we're told it's on the house. Chan puts her hand to her heart in gratitude, waves back to her friend and we dig in, feeding our smiles with chocolate.

## CHAPTER 7.

"Where do your songs come from? Do you hear them and then go find them on the piano? Or, do you have some clear regimen where you just work until they arrive?"

I'm not sure where I'm going with this. I'm trying to open up the conversation to something less challenging, with more air and room to think and speculate, without having to articulate anything that might be upsetting. I might end up doing the opposite. I don't know. After a while, I ask where the ocean is, even though I know it's hidden behind the string of trees in front of us, past the unused swimming pool, far enough away for the sound of the waves to get mixed up with the sound of the wind. *That* way is the ocean, it's obvious, yet a part of me feels as if this place where we've been sitting for the past hour or so has been moving along with the cloud cover and the water might now be to our backs. I'm arguing about this with myself when she starts speaking.

"There's actually a song in this place."

I recognize the phrase from somewhere.

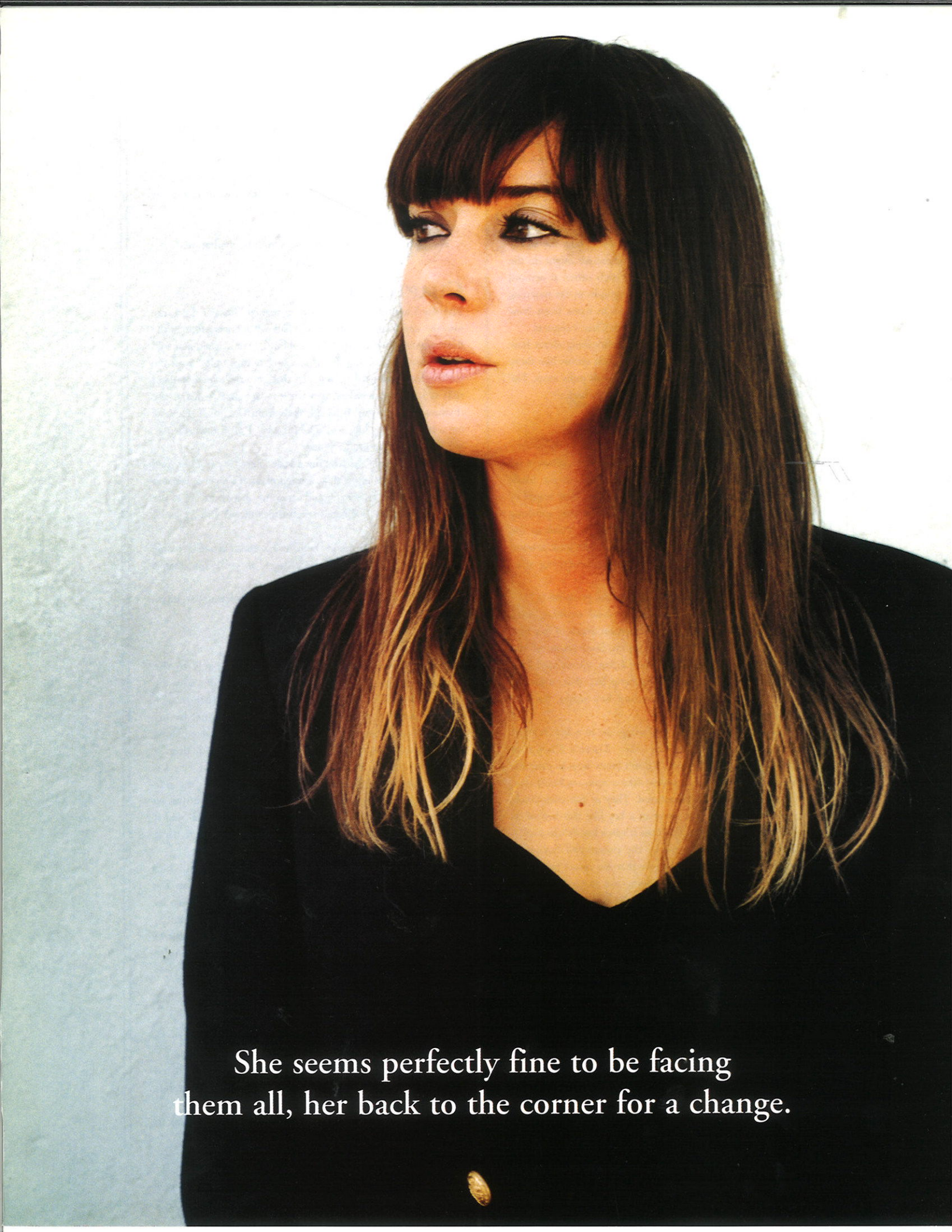
She continues, softly, "There can be a place anywhere and it doesn't matter where it is. There could be an instrument there and you're just...there. Another time you're somewhere else and almost in the back of your mind, you know there's an instrument somewhere and maybe—like you might get hungry, or you want to go get a cookie or something—you go get an instrument, or you go near an instrument, you go near that thing and you kind of physically hang out with that *thing*. You hang out with that instrument and that's where it happens. There might be something that has no form. It's similar to a smell or a sight or a feeling or a sense. You don't know where you're going to start or what it's going to be, but it's where you go."

"Are you ever afraid of it?"

"Absolutely not." This is her second quickest response of the evening.

## CHAPTER 8.

Chan lingers within, saying her goodbyes to her friends in the restaurant, gracious again for the dessert and thanking at least four different people on her way out. We're outside now. We're walking up the sidewalk, the night is warm, she lights up a cigarette. At the sound of metal clapping, she holds up the lighter to show me the small face of Bob Dylan on her Zippo. She asks me if I like him. I say of course. I ask her if she's had the chance



She seems perfectly fine to be facing  
them all, her back to the corner for a change.

to read his book. She says something about how she'd rather not know that much about him, but she might end up reading it someday. This leads to more talk about books. She likes most of Haruki Murakami's novels, telling me about how she was on the road once and was reading a book of his and was so taken by what she was reading, when she turned the page and realized it was a book of short stories and not a novel, she was so heartbroken that what she just read was over, done, gone, that she couldn't bring herself to read the rest of the collection.

We get inside a cab and she has the driver take me to my hotel. We talk about tomorrow night, where we might do the "real" interview, we decide we'll call each other at around 2pm, after she's done doing more photographs in the morning with her friend Hanna—an artist who's in town from New York and taking the photos for the piece at Chan's request.

We hug briefly. I thank her. She says something about how "it was good to break the ice, even though it seems like there wasn't much ice to break." I wave as the cab pulls away. The windows are tinted and I can't see if she waves back.

## CHAPTER 9.

The party seems to have dispersed—that yellow rectangle up there is dark again, returning everything back to the bleak slate grey light from when we first arrived. Another round of mojitos. A man with a Finnish accent walks nearby speaking to someone about a cruise ship he works on, "not as the captain, but with computers, below deck." We look around but don't see anyone. Chan starts to say something after thinking for a while.

"This is the first time there was a positive grasp on it."

She's speaking here of *The Greatest* and working with people like Teenie Hodges, the guitarist on much of her new album, a major figure in the Memphis Soul scene of the '70s, who co-wrote songs like "Here I Am, Come and Take Me" with Al Green and how something like this, someone like him, could end up with her and her songs, back in Memphis, on her own album.

"It's in a key. It has a key. The songs are in a key. It's not improvisational; it's actually in a key. There's a key that everyone's playing with at once. I don't know how to describe it. It's like the songs are a note—like a *note*—a backbone. They're not dissonant and fractured. They're not completely whole, but they are. It was never in a key like this before. It was always meandering, but this time it's in a key. It's in a *key!*"

She stops, frustrated again by the process of having to explain these things, realizing maybe that she raised her voice. I tell her it's my fault, that I'm being too vague, maybe we should be talking about what she'd be doing if she never decided to do this interview, play a piano, make songs and records or play shows. Maybe we should move on to something else entirely.

"My plan was to be a baker," she smiles, telling me about her first days in New York before she was "Cat Power" or known. "That's what I thought I'd do. I just thought, 'I'm gonna get out of here and go to New York and be a baker.' I never thought I'd be a waitress. I had a friend. We used to play music together and it made no sense. It made no sense and it was healthy. Somehow, that kind of experience was healthy."

We look around and decide to go walk along the shore. It's so bright and clear—full of the almost full moon—and we're both so restless, maybe even a bit spooked by this place now. I'm about to turn off the recorder, encouraged by how her

face lights up at the prospect of ending this. We start moving in our chairs, finishing off our drinks, both making the small clamor of two people about to embark. She starts talking while she puts a napkin in her glass.

"Man, it's just very weird. To me it all seems so obvious. That's the thing. It seems so *obvious*. But maybe there's something wrong. Maybe I'm not describing it clearly enough."

I tell her it's OK.

Someone somewhere whispers, "Don't be mad at me."

## CHAPTER 10.

The day I arrived in Miami, a man named Gustavo drove me into the city from the airport. He had a flamenco guitar in the front passenger seat. I asked him about it. He laughed and told me it wasn't such a big deal, that he sometimes plays it in the parking lot waiting for passengers, that he wasn't any good and that it sometimes takes him three years just to learn the rhythms of one Spanish ballad. He's from Columbia. He asks me a bit about my life, so I tell him what I'm in town for. We talk a bit about the music we like.

"I hated school," he tells me a little later. "My teacher-used to beat me on the legs with a wooden plank if I'd get an answer wrong. My own mother would strip me naked and beat me until I passed out—'What is seven times three! I'm 51 and I still hate school.'"

He smiles, looks at me in the rearview and tells me he's only talking about this stuff because it's good to get it out, that it helps to talk about it.

I wonder what he's trying to say when he's playing his guitar.

## CHAPTER 11.

I'm on a plane, leaving Miami, listening closely to the recording of the previous night. I'm hearing now how she finds it so difficult to speak about certain things. I'm embarrassed by my own voice, by my questions, by my inability to just leave her alone. Later, when we walked along the shoreline, she was a different person. Relieved, tired. I apologized for the interview. We went somewhere else for another drink. She apologized for her answers. On the ride back to my hotel, she said more than once, "Last night was so much fun. Not tonight. But last night was good." She said it like a mantra, almost to remind herself that all was not lost that second evening. She was quiet for most of the ride.

But this is a woman who sounds almost immortal when she's living inside her songs. There are moments on *The Greatest* when her voice is aloft and being held there by these masterful musicians—moments that make you think, "This is the best thing any one of us can do with whatever we've been given." You think it might be soul music. You're almost sure it is.

## CHAPTER 12.

Somewhere a woman's voice whispers, "You have to promise."

It's on the tape. It's Chan's voice. I rewind it and listen again. She's speaking so softly, you can barely hear her through the wind. But it's there. "You have to promise."

I wonder what any of us are trying to say when we speak to each other. **F**



# A Selected Discography of Cat Power

WITH COMMENTARY BY CHAN MARSHALL



**DEAR SIR**  
(Plain; 1995):  
“Turbulent.”

**MYRA LEE**  
(Smells Like Records;  
1996):  
“Same thing.”

**WHAT WOULD THE  
COMMUNITY THINK**  
(Matador; 1996):  
“Resilient, maybe. Not  
resilient. What’s the word?  
Rejecting...not rejecting.  
Denial. Not denial, like the  
definition, but like an

active...I don’t know. [Long  
pause] Struggle!”

**MOON PIX**  
(Matador; 1998):  
“Release. That’s the word.  
Release. Twenty-six years  
old.”

**THE COVERS RECORD**  
(Matador; 2000):  
“A breath of fresh air.”

**YOU ARE FREE**  
(Matador; 2003):  
“A combination. Like the  
middle of something.”



**THE GREATEST**  
(Matador; 2006):  
**Chan:** An homage. I don’t know what that  
means...an homage...  
**Filter:** To pay tribute to something by try-  
ing to emulate it?

**Chan:** No.

**Filter:** Isn’t that what it means?

**Chan:** Is it?

**Filter:** I think so. Or, showing your respect for something by try-  
ing to do it yourself...

**Chan:** I don’t fucking know what it is [laughs]. It’s like an hom-  
age to the human spirit. It’s a real thing. It’s the closest thing that  
I could do now.

**Filter:** Closest to what?

**Chan:** To whatever it is that I do. It’s the closest thing that I  
could do now, at this time.