

SALLY POTTER

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PHOTO
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The film maestro on her musical debut.

Since the release of Sally Potter's first feature film, *The Gold Diggers*, in 1983, commentators have obsessed over her experiences as a female filmmaker. The acclaimed writer and director of *Orlando* and *Ginger & Rosa*—and over a dozen other films—finds this fixation exasperating. “Don't you want to talk about how I work with light and actors, about structure and narrative, about illusion, transcendence and all these fantastically interesting things that make up cinema?” she says, recalling these exchanges. Potter defines herself, rather, by what she makes—and that includes music. Following stints in bands such as the Feminist Improvising Group and composing scores for many of her films, she released her debut studio album, *Pink Bikini*, in the summer of 2023. The intimate, semi-autobiographical record gives a snapshot of teenage life in 1960s London and reconfirms Potter as a constantly inventive artist unsatisfied with restricting herself to a single art form.

CHARLES SHAFAlEH: Was the directness of *Pink Bikini*, in the lyrics and its conversational tone, intentional?

SALLY POTTER: Absolutely. This was about choosing a plain, raw vocal sound, as if I'm singing to just one other person. That's the principle with which I work on films, too. It's an illusion that you're making a film for millions. You have to direct as if for your dearest friend. I don't need to overdramatize, but I do need to be truthful. Every stage—from choosing the type of microphone to the mastering—had a discussion about intimacy and purity of sound.

CS: Your films also utilize direct address frequently, but often nothing is what it seems. Clarity and the mysterious coexist.

SP: I'm very interested in mystery but not in mystification. False mystery is when the filmmaker or writer is willfully holding back a piece of information to create puzzlement. When you're being raw and open, what becomes evoked is the greater mystery: Who the hell are we? What are we doing here? How do we relate to each other?

CS: *Pink Bikini* touches on subjects few people sing about today, such as banning the atomic bomb. Other songs engage with topics like teenage sexuality in a more frank—even taboo—manner than is typical.

SP: Because they're true. It's really simple: I remember during

my teenage years the longing that was erotic, that was love, and the confusion of whether I wanted this or that person—the passions I had for other girls in friendship and in love, and for boys who I thought were so desirable I could die. I suspect that level of passion and desire is present through most people's teenage years, but they hide it away.

CS: There's a difference between sensationalism and honesty.

SP: Quite honestly, sexuality in films makes me want to throw up. Explicitness, in a funny way, hides real feeling. It loses contact with desire as a vulnerable and delicate, albeit also strong and powerful, thing. Sensationalism numbs everyone and turns everything into a performance. My criterion for that kind of writing on this album was to be vulnerable and true, but not to do anything for effect.

CS: Is that why none of the songs are sentimental? Rebellion and action—recurring themes on the album—don't allow for that.

SP: I'm not a fan of sentimentality, but I'm a great fan of sentiment—of true feeling and true thought. We are thinking-feeling-body-mind creatures. Sentimentality is when it becomes fake.

CS: In your films, people are often depicted listening—to records, city sounds, others having sex. The music is frequently heard by the characters too. Is sound often overlooked in films?

SP: Looking dominates people's experience [of cinema]. There's this huge image which is so full of information that, to absorb it, you're scanning and scanning, and your brain is processing the clues the filmmaker gives about the character, their life, their environment. A lot of people absorb the sound subliminally. I've always been interested in working with sound in a much more conscious way. I compose tracks or the whole soundtrack; I curate music from other musicians as well as silence, which has sound. You start to tune the sound effects, too. As far as I'm concerned, it's all music. The word “listening” is very important to me. It takes one person listening to change the dynamic in any conflict. I always talk to actors about not just being “on” when you're speaking—you're “on” when you're listening. The most interesting character on screen is the one listening to the other one. An awareness of listening as an active, not passive, state is crucial.

