

THIS WEEK

Cover News
Opinion A & E
Sports IMs
Calendar Comics

YH FEATURES

Exclusive
Archives / Search
Planet of Sound
Speak Your Mind
Pick the Pros
Crossword

ONLINE TOOLS

Ground Zero
Sublet Search
Rideboard
Book Shopper
Blue Book Search

ABOUT US

The Yale Herald
YH Online

Starwell makes love to her alter-ego

BY JAMES SUMNER

Everyone and his art history girlfriend has thought he was the next Heidegger after realizing that Life imitates Art which imitates Life. No one seems to explore the far grander possibility, that Life imitates Pop. The exhibition *The Life and Times of Marisa Starwell*, currently on display in Green Hall, peeks behind the geek glasses and retro clothing and discovers that art majors, like everyone else, just want to be rock stars.



ERIN I. LEWIS/YH

Somewhat adoring fans line up for the somewhat rock starlet.

The exhibit chronicles the fictional rise, rehab, and return of the Bowie-esque rock alter-ego of Marisa Futernick, SY '02. "I've always been obsessed with pop music," she says. "I just realized it would be more fun to be in a band than to be an artist." Instead of waiting for the suits to sign her, Futernick invented Starwell and began designing covers and song titles for non-existent albums. Call it self-aggrandizing with a Borgesian twist. According to the short biography accompanying the "retrospective," Starwell, née Futernick, picked up guitar at age 12 and enjoyed moderate success in two bands before launching a brilliant solo career. "Snatch was actually semi-real," Futernick says of Starwell's early grrrl band with song titles like "Angst" and "I Don't Wanna Go to the Prom." The band played a few Yale shows two years ago. "But I never played with them," Futernick adds. "I was sick."

Most people don't have the chance to make good on regrets like Futernick has. The tongue-in-cheek show keeps a straight face, right down to the acknowledgments, which thank her "father figures" David Bowie and Iggy Pop. ("They came to see me everyday in rehab," Starwell notes in the *New Musical Express* interview transcribed for the exhibit.) At a reception the night of Tues., Apr. 10, Starwell signed (empty) CDs in full glam-pop regalia: a silver-spangled blouse and choker and oversized, don't-think-I'm-making-eye-contact Nine West sunglasses.

In the show, the albums are Futernick's strongest work, saying far more than the fictional bios and interviews. Like any good satirist or impostor, she has absorbed the formulae of her target medium and reproduces it to a tee. The colorized photo of *The Beatles Versus the Stones* captures the homey near-kitsch of Belle and Sebastian album covers, while *Film Star* is a black-and-white nod to the excess of stardom, depicting Futernick applying lipstick in distorting mirrors. The cover of Starwell's first single, "A Gin and Tonic Kind of Girl," looks, well, like a gin and tonic kind of girl. Looking at Starwell photoshopped between the Ramones and Iggy Pop at CBGB's, or reading about her brief romance with John Cusack and failed marriage to Stuart Murdoch of Belle and Sebastian, it's difficult not to see shades of self-indulgence. On the other hand, accusing this show of self-indulgence is a bit like calling Andy Warhol repetitive.

A surprising portion of the show is devoted to non-Starwell discs. Again taking a cue from Bowie, Futernick decided Starwell needed to expand into production, resulting in The Linty Mints, the band fronted by Futernick's boyfriend, Paul Huckerby. "Paul is in a couple of bands, and I had an idea of what this all-male, indie-pop band should sound like," Futernick says. In a peculiar reversal, Huckerby has since written songs to half the titles on The Linty Mints' LP *Seaside Holiday*, and one of his bands is considering The Linty Mints as a name. "They really sound just like the album looks," she says, "which is what I wanted."

So what does unwritten music sound like? An album of covers including songs by the Apples in Stereo and the Magnetic Fields suggests a certain upbeat approachability. An effusive blurb assures us that Starwell is a genuine "pop songwriter." Futernick, a true chameleon says, "a mix of DIY punk and the Velvet Underground."

Having narrowly escaped the classic O.D. and made the classic comeback, what's the future of Marisa Starwell? Will she break into avant-garde experimental noise no one understands for 20 years, if ever? Will she don tights and prance on camera with *really* frightening Muppets and animatronics? An "album" already dubbed disc of the year by *Spin* is due in the fall, after which, Futernick says, "maybe I should get really bad."

[Back to A&E...](#)

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