

DAILY NEWS

\$1.00

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

NYDailyNews.com

BEAUTIFULLY 'SCARRED'

Ever feel ruined? Johnette Napolitano has. And she's not afraid to admit it on her startling new solo album. Nearly every track on "Scarred" finds the singer who used to front Concrete Blonde wailing about her inner sense of deformity.

"Look at my hands," she implores in the opening track. "Clumsy stumps," she calls them.

"Take a picture of this [face]," she dares a woman who may be freak photographer Diane Arbus. In the title track, Napolitano looks to her soul and pronounces it "Scarred."

It takes a ravenously angry voice to bring off lines like that. Like Joplin at her most raw, Napolitano can tap into feelings so needy it's either freeing or horrifying, depending on your state of mind.

Napolitano also plumbed those depths in her best '80s work with Concrete Blonde, like the hit "Joey," about forgiving an estranged loved one. It's too bad they couldn't sustain their success. The band ended by the

mid-'90s. Since then, the singer has concentrated on collaborations and visual art projects. "Scarred" rates as her first solo work, at age 50.

The music won't surprise old fans. It's Napolitano's usual mix of rockers and ballads, blackened with splashes of Gothic metal. For all their fear and loathing, the songs boast melodies that catch the ear. "Just Like Time" has pop appeal. "Save Me" swaggers with a heavy metal flair.

Napolitano stirred two covers into her brew. Her version of Coldplay's "The Scientist" finds a grit its author missed. A take on the Velvet Underground's "All Tomorrow's Parties" benefits from some added metal whomp.

The power of Napolitano's voice gives these pieces her own spin. She can captivate with her speaking voice alone, which she employs in prominent stretches on several tracks. When she really lets loose with a full vocal yowl, though, watch out. The ones on "Scarred" are unflinching—and liberating for just that reason. ♦

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JOHNETTE NAPOLITANO