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band width



Eels
*Eels With Strings:
Live At Town Hall*
(Vagrant Records)

Ever hear an instrumental passage that speaks more than a composition notebook's worth of good lyrics? On Eels' 2005 album *Blinking Lights And Other Revelations*, several moments like these are sprinkled over the course of two discs. The tracks swim in an autumnal sadness, and, when placed among the lyrical observations of one-man show Mark Oliver Everett, they turn a great record into a transcendent one. While only one of these instrumentals makes it onto *Eels With Strings: Live at Town Hall*, their unforgettable arrangements inspire the whole show (recorded on June 30, 2005, at Town Hall in New York City).

Everett assembled a touring band with the purpose of recreating those tender, dusky sounds, featuring a string quartet and a Tom Waitsian array of instrumentation and found instruments, including celeste, pump organ, trash can, saw, autoharp and a suitcase. The result is as unique and arresting as it sounds: The band touches on an array of Eels records, translating them all into fragile chamber pop masterpieces. And while life's struggles are the order of the day—highlights include an autoharp-and-vocal performance of "Railroad Man," the undulating, celeste-driven "Trouble With Dreams" and a gut-wrenching rendition of Bob Dylan's "Girl From the North Country"—Everett's playful, sarcastic streak is well represented. "I Like Birds" is smack dab in the middle of the show for a reason; its friendly, three-chord bounce, background whistling and whimsical lyrics ("It's alright if you act like a turd/'Cause I like birds") are welcome sunbeams amongst the clouds.

The set's closer, "Things the Grandchildren Should Know," is about as honest as music can get. Everett spills his anxieties into the microphone, contemplating his fear that he's turning into his father over the slow crescendo of his band. But he isn't one of those self-centered, "poor me" kind of artists, and after this outpouring of regret and confusion, the song ends with an inspired streak of optimism: "In the end I'd like to say/That I'm a very thankful man...I have some regrets but if I had to do it all again/Well, it's something I'd like to do." As the track winds down, Everett sings the main melody of his instrumentals, giving us a sonic equivalent to the "blinking lights" that randomly illuminate the beautiful things in life. If nothing else, *Live at Town Hall* is one of them.

—joe sweeney



Whysall Lane
Whysall Lane
(Blackball)

Throughout the 1990s Richard Baluyut created music that was at once unsettling and arrestingly beautiful with his band Versus. His lyrics were often as poetic as they were direct, and while his appreciation of the cathartic possibilities in incorporating noise, both artistically and aggressively, surfaced in Versus' music, he never allowed it to overpower his acute sense of melodic priorities and pop song structure, derived as much from the Kinks as from the Pixies. Baluyut's command of dramatic shifts in volume and tempo gave his work in Versus a unique tension and nuance that many fans found unforgettable. The same tendencies and talents are obvious in his writing for Whysall Lane, a moniker under which he has been recording and performing for several years now.

Members have come and gone, but it seems Baluyut has finally settled on a Whysall Lane lineup with some longevity. He's recruited former Jawbreaker drummer Adam Pfahler and bassist/vocalist Mikel Delgado, whose voice is remarkably similar to Baluyut's female vocal foil in Versus, Fontaine Troups. This isn't a Versus album, but it sure sounds like one. To many people, that's enough of a recommendation.

Baluyut's specialty has always been the buildup, starting songs simply, sparsely and softly, before pushing them to epic climaxes of layered guitars and vocals, to name just a few elements he's employed to breathtaking ends. In Versus, escalations in volume and intensity often ended crushingly, even cacophonously. With Whysall Lane, Baluyut is less heavy-handed when shifting gears within a song. The rise and fall of tracks like "The Way Back," "Pillows" and "Wither Without You" is more subtle but no less engaging or effective.

"Time Machine" comes out of the chute at a gallop, fueled throughout by a charging guitar riff and Pfahler's crash and bang drumming. "Theme" wastes no time either, jumping directly into its propulsive rhythm and dancey beat, but most of the tracks develop at a more deliberate pace, slowly unfolding from quiet guitar, bass and drum arrangements with piano and string accents to lines of surging organ, edgier guitars and layers of cascading, intertwining male/female vocals. It's these meticulously woven vocal lines that elevate *Whysall Lane* to a level well beyond most rock records in recent memory.

The contrasting of Baluyut's bleak and sometimes graphic lyrics with his sublime melodies and the album's lush layering endow many of the songs with remarkable poignancy. The most striking example of this is found on "High Heels," when he sings, "Blood on the concrete of a parking garage/Stuffed in the trunk of a stolen car/Yes, I remember, naked in high heel shoes/This is your body, it isn't you," before falling into the simple, pretty refrain "it isn't you," graced with a stirring string arrangement by Baluyut's brother, and the album's producer, James.

"During the Mutiny" explores the much more common tragedy of ennui and infidelity. Baluyut sings, "I'm a salesman, you're a call girl, steaming up the windows/Peeping Tom, cheating mom, sneaking around the suburbs" over delicately rendered instrumentation dominated by acoustic guitar and piano. It's this rare ability to find beauty in the midst of heartbreak and devastation that makes Richard Baluyut an exceptional songwriter and *Whysall Lane* an outstanding album.

—matt barber

Artist name: Chris Squier

When/Where playing this week?

"Eat Crow" concert on Thursday, March 30 at 8pm, the Hidden Shamrock Pub (<http://www.kerilea.net/eatcrowe.html>)

Friday, March 31 at 8pm, Clarence Center Coffee Co.

Band members/names/instrument...

We have kind of a songwriter's society of sorts that was started by Steve Roth, loosely called the Gravedigger's Union. While we all play solo, for larger shows we also play other instruments to back each other up. Regular members include Steve, Meredith Brown, Brian Mcalonie, Armand Petri, Dave Miller and pretty much anyone else who we can convince that we don't completely suck.



You might like my music if you like... Folk rock with an Americana edge. Counting Crows, Stephen Stills and CSN, the Wallflowers. I guess, being from Jersey, there's a bit of Springsteen in there as well. I love his acoustic stuff.

List of Recorded Releases

No Ordinary Anything - 2006

The Interstates EP - 2002

Upcoming events: In addition to the shows listed above, I've been fortunate enough to have some upcoming appearances around the country, and am looking to get into some festivals such as Appel Farm and CMJ in Ohio.

Worst show the band ever played: When I was younger I got roped into a bad deal with a now-defunct production company. We were promised a full backline, tons of cash, food, hotel—the whole nine yards—as part of their "artist showcase." It was an all-day event. We were out of cash, so we thought we'd eat there then play our 1pm slot. When we got there, there was no food, no equipment, and we got bumped to the last slot—sometime around 11pm. One of the other bands took pity on us, bought us lunch and let us use their gear. Best part was, because the company lost their shirt on the event, they decided to try to shake down all the bands for cash after the show, claiming that they did not "promote the event properly" or some lame excuse like that. My first introduction into the music business!

Best show the band ever played: Every show after that. One that really stands out is a little place called Rockin' Java in San Francisco. Being a fan of a lot of Haight-Ashbury bands, it was kind of a religious experience for me to get a chance to play out there. The song "California (Queen of Light)" from the CD was inspired by that.

Anything else you would like our readers to know about the band? I'm incredibly grateful for all the support and enthusiasm Buffalo has shown me since I've lived here. If you haven't come to a show, stop on out! By the way, the new CD is called *No Ordinary Anything*, and is available on cdbaby.com and can be heard on 107.7 *The Lake*.

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