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The Dust Dive

Asleep Or Awake Walk
 Free103point9
 2004
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So here's a piece of the back-story: as Olathe's municipal website proudly explains, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 created the Kansas Territory, opening the land to pre-emption by home seekers of European descent from the more heavily populated states." Fast forward two-thirds of the way through the 20th century and the frontier state that has since served as public proxy for the average American 'Normal' is among the poorest in the union, and exemplary of an American underclass willingly and vigorously voting itself over the rainbow and down a deep dark cistern over a desperately waged phantom "culture war". The Dust Dive's Bryan Zimmerman was born and raised in Olathe, Kansas, and along with chief instrumentalist Laura Ortman and co-vocalist/organist Ken Switzer, has made (murmuring below the more exaggerated/idealized works of new-folk indie-heroes like Iron & Wine, Sufjan Stevens, Devendra Banhart) one of the year's most fragile and personal indie-folk records: a warm, evocative and poetically exhaustive emotional catalog of people-places-and-stings, rooted deeply in a geography that adulthood, and perhaps the subtlest shift in ideology, has irretrievably distanced. I'm a Kansas City boy myself and I'm most certainly projecting. This is not a manifestly political record and is not purposefully thematic in quite the way I've set it up. But when you grow up poor and Normal (not normal) in the "Sunflower State" and watch each year as another wedge wedges between you and a home that's methodically cannibalizing itself, well it's going to color your reflections on what is material and lasting in your own past, sitting there on your work like a hood ornament you can't gank—it's something The Dust Dive know something about and have captured engagingly on their debut.

Musically we are in overtly romantic territory, the kind of American gothic portraiture popularized by the Dirty Three, Palace, and Sparklehorse (though frequent passages of harmonic/microtonal density and abstract landscapes constructed out of scarcely discernible field recordings has TDD casting their lot in with the likes of out-folks like Grandpa's Ghost, Jandek, Akron/Family, or P.G. Six). The instrumental textures are stark and monochromatic, relying almost entirely on finger-style electric guitar, violin, chord-organ, and field recordings (with the occasional pleasantly mossy upright piano or saw). The results are centered, economic, and if occasionally obvious, prove an effective offset to vocals that run from austere to jarringly dense and discordant.

In fact, your appreciation may very well pivot on how you feel about the vocals: telescoped layers of radioed-in voices that foreground (and even obscure) Zimmerman's winding, circular prose. Opaque vocal production and a reluctance to conform lyrics to any sort of metrical or melodic structure contributes to the diaristic and timeless (in the "time is barely moving" sense of the word) tenor of the record. This is not to say the vocals (think Thurston Moore doing Syd Barrett), while lyrically-driven, lack musical lyricism. What's remarkable to me is that the songs achieve an essentially literary/poetic effect through musical technique. Throughout, the simultaneous lyrical threads come to engender a sort of punk-folk motet, giving props to the abstractions attendant to the act of memory. Zimmerman creates linguistic dirt bike paths through tall-grass prairies, touring backyard forts and vagrant mental monuments commemorating the sublimated tools and leavings of a Midwestern exurban childhood desire: hand-fashioned crawdad fishing tools, midnight tailgating parties, gagging on the smell of perfume/makeup in church, Playboys stolen from dad's shed, Suzuki crotch-rockets, plastic ghetto blasters with AC/DC and Run DMC tapes, tadpoles with extra digits. We are given an endless inventory of artifacts and a quietly unfolding obsession to connect the dots to nothing (but not Nothing) in particular, bitterly-sweetly celebrating an un-zoned freedom of manageably human scale.

To tell the truth, while The Dust Dive creates seductive music it is neither inviting nor welcoming. It does not embrace you, is not *about* you, you are not welcome to sing along, come out to cruise the Santa Fe or hang out at Perkins after work. You are not invited. "I wanna be out there alone" Bryan sings, and I believe him. Most every salient gesture on this record carries implicit distance, right down to field recordings that evoke more the damaged structure of memory than the places memory is attempting to conjure. The band does not paint a picture you can step inside of, they present a scrapbook: bits of hair, dust, scabs, mud dauber carcasses and answering machine tapes. When Zimmerman sings "I just

"Sweet Black & Blue Pop"
 - Harp

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wanna take you to this place where I blank out at" it is with full knowledge that neither of us will arrive at the place where he blanks out at—remaining only in the hazy blanket of the blanking out, the asleep-or-awake place.

The record is not without flaw—a track sequence that almost wholly backends its most compelling and succinct statements, instrumentals that seem to wither on the vine and fade before fully realizing themselves, the ill-advised use (on one of its loveliest tracks) of a voice-synthesizer that Radiohead sort of ruined for all time—but in most cases the seams and awkwardnesses are what lend it the recklessly humane qualities that make it a notable and heartbreaking piece of work in a subgenre that can sometimes be a little too taken-in by the fictions of its own authenticity.



Reviewed by: William S. Fields
Reviewed on: 2005-01-05
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