

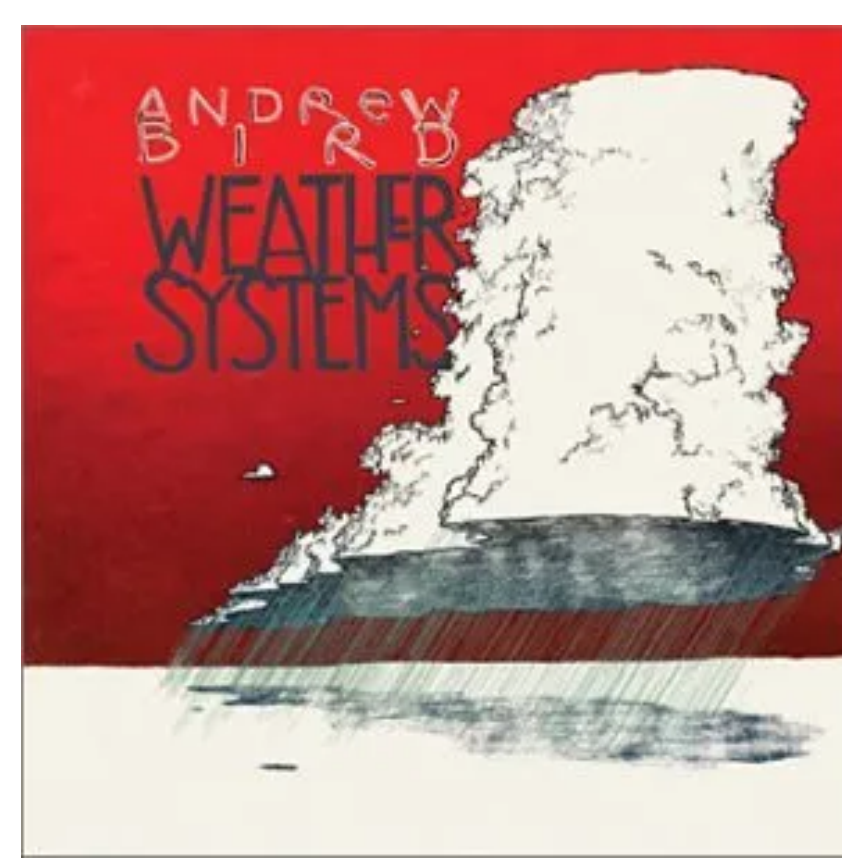
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ALBUMS

# Weather Systems

Andrew Bird

2003



8.3

By Joe Tangari

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Fashion comes and goes, and art frequently goes with it. Fashion rather curiously caught Andrew Bird in its current in the mid-'90s, as he became erroneously linked to the regrettable neo-swing movement via his violin contributions to the Squirrel Nut Zippers, a band who I maintain were themselves unfairly lumped in with a movement that they largely transcended. The fact is, Bird's music, both as an accomplice to the Zippers and with his own band, Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire, has never really fit with any kind of trend, and he's better off for it-- what he winds up with on each of his albums is always hard to pinpoint and frequently possesses a timeless quality that only a select few recordings ever manage.

You have to appreciate novelty and cabaret humor to get into Bird's first two albums, *Thrills* and *Oh! The Grandeur!* Those records channeled the parlor music of the 20s along with Berthold Brecht and Django Reinhardt to create a pastiche so effective it might as well have been the real thing. But two years ago, Bird branched out on the stunning *Swimming Hour*, basically a sonic time capsule for the 20th century that loaded everything from American mountain folk and jump blues to straight-up rock and roll and orchestral pop into a single, masterful casing. If there had ever been any doubt that Bird wasn't tied to the neo-swing scene, *The Swimming Hour* killed it swiftly.

With *Weather Systems*, Bird's first record without the Bowl of Fire moniker on the sleeve, he's managed to synthesize his myriad influences to the point where you can't hear any of them distinctly anymore. These nine tracks, written at Bird's rural Illinois barn studio, hint at broad American musical traditions without being tied directly to any of them. A stripped down backing band consisting of Nora O'Connor on backing vocals and guitar, Kevin O'Donnell on drums and Mark Nevers on "space guitar" keeps things fairly simple, allowing Bird to shape the sound with his vocals and truly amazing violin playing.

Bird is easily one of the best violinists ever to devote himself to popular music (as opposed to, say, Shostakovich), as his palette of sounds on the instrument is so broad here that it's sometimes slow to dawn that you're hearing a bow on strings. He weaves intricate layers of pizzicato skittering and legato texture everywhere, turning himself into a small orchestra to create a series of beautiful, well-considered arrangements for his songs. "First Song" rolls in like dust off the plains, with Bird whistling a loopy spaghetti-Western fanfare, while his fingerstyle violin plucking slowly creates a rich bed for his and O'Connor's harmonies. The deliciously evil "I" shatters the pastoral mood, though, as Bird's dissonant violin arrangement includes some strings pitch-shifted to sound like demon cellos and O'Connor's guitar sputtering like a dying gunshot victim. The vocal melody floats uneasily amidst the drones, and it takes a second to realize just how little Bird is using to create one of the most sinister songs I've heard all year.

WATCH

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"Lull" bobs on O'Donnell's brushed drums and Bird's lilting violin ostinatos, with verses that develop like something off of Paul Simon's *Graceland*, retaining the basic shape of the melody, but inserting subtle substitutions in phrasing to keep you surprised. The loose male/female harmonies sound so natural and unstaged that this could be two people singing together anywhere, just passing time. The barebones cover of The Handsome Family's "Don't Be Scared" is so full of ache and longing it sounds like he wrote it himself.

The disc closes its too-brief runtime (nine songs in just over half an hour) with an untitled instrumental that slyly reprises the violin undercarriage of "Lull" while spinning a brief keyboard melody nicked from the beginning of "Don't Be Scared" into a full-on rhapsody of swelling violin while O'Donnell pounds away on what sound like kettle drums in the background. If you close your eyes and turn it up loud enough, it feels like you're levitating. That Bird can stand this far out in leftfield and still make music so colossally affecting is what makes him one of my favorite current artists. It's quite possible that neo-swing's flash-in-the-pan also constituted Bird's 15 minutes of fame, and that's a damn shame, because this is music for the ages that demands to be heard.

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