



ALBUMS

Lie Down in the Light

Bonnie "Prince" Billy

2008



8.7

BEST NEW MUSIC

By Stephen M. Deasener

GENRE: Folk/Country LABEL: Drag City REVIEWED: May 27, 2008

Will Oldham's latest could be the evil twin of the singer/songwriter's career peak, 1999's *I See a Darkness*: If that 90s record plumbed the bleakness of life, *Lie Down in the Light* finds peace in the modest pleasures of friends, family, and music.

Dependable isn't a glamorous adjective for a musician, and reliability doesn't sell a lot of records, but Will Oldham, through his arsenal of aliases, has been creating consistently good music for nearly two decades. At least once a year, he releases an album, EP, mini-LP, or collaboration—and it's almost always worth hearing. At his worst, he drops a bomb like *The Brave & the Bold*, his covers album with Tortoise; at his best, as on his defining 1999 album *I See a Darkness* (recorded under the name Bonnie "Prince" Billy), he completely uproots American musical traditions. The upside is a career with an even trajectory—rising only slightly but never falling off—and the freedom to chase any rabbit he wants. The downsides: His albums all sell about the same; his audience, while loyal, neither grows nor dwindles; his followers (Iron & Wine, Pinetop Seven) sometimes surpass him; and his presence within indie rock generally comforts rather than excites.

At first blush, the most interesting aspect of Oldham's latest album (another as Bonnie "Prince" Billy) is its Raconteurish release strategy. Emphasizing digital downloads over jewel-cased CDs, Drag City rushed it to stores with little warning and nothing in the way of a promo blitz, bypassing critics' previews, promotional mp3s, and all the rigmarole that typically sells an indie album. Similar endeavors by more mainstream acts have yielded disappointing returns, but Oldham's audience will seek him out. And while *Lie Down in the Light* may not actually change his career arc, it should find a very loyal listenership beyond his fans.

For such a reliable artist, *Lie Down in the Light* is good enough to be actually exciting, perhaps Oldham's best since *Darkness*, which could be its evil twin. If that 10.0-worthy record plumbed the bleakness of life, *Light* finds peace in the modest pleasures of friends, family, and music. "I like the places where the night does not mean an end," he sings on "You Remind Me of Something (The Glory Goes)", "Where smiles break free and surprise is your friend/ And dancing goes on in the kitchen until dawn/ To my favorite song that has no end." At times on this album, Oldham sounds like he's found just that place.

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Musically, these meticulously crafted songs—produced by Mark Nevers of Lambchop—give the impression of front-porch spontaneity, their purposefulness made to sound like serendipity. Oldham mines many of the same musical veins as he has on previous albums—these songs are heavy with old gospel, country, folk, and other Americana sounds—but he tweaks them in new ways, adding twists and turns that even some of his most ardent fans may not expect. The free-wheeling "Easy Does It" opens the album with a churchy jangle in which Oldham's band (which includes mainstays Paul Oldham and Emmett Kelly, along with scads of Nashville musicians) trade solos. A Bakersfield guitar passes the plate to a barrelhouse piano, which yields to a melodica, and all the while Oldham hums like he's in a jug band. It's as if the instruments were introducing themselves so you'll recognize them in later songs, but that doesn't account for the clarinet that goes off on a wild tear on "For Every Field There's a Mole", adding a jazzy element that sends the song careering in a new direction, namely a rewrite of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 ("To every thing there is a season..."). Similarly, a mournful pedal steel punctuates "You Want That Picture", and the ambient woodwinds and percussive acoustic guitar give "Keep Eye on) Other's Gain" an almost psychedelic sensibility.

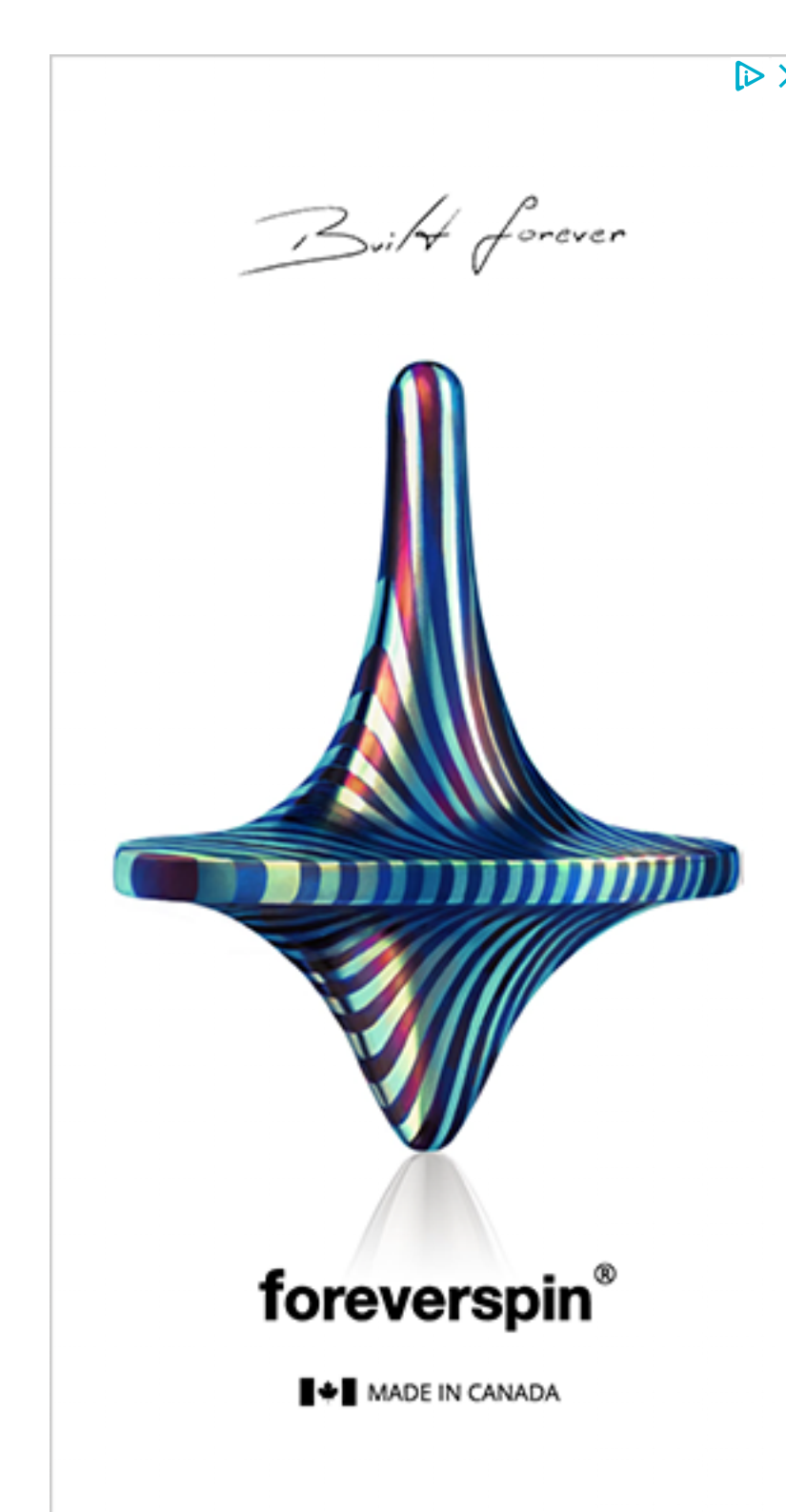
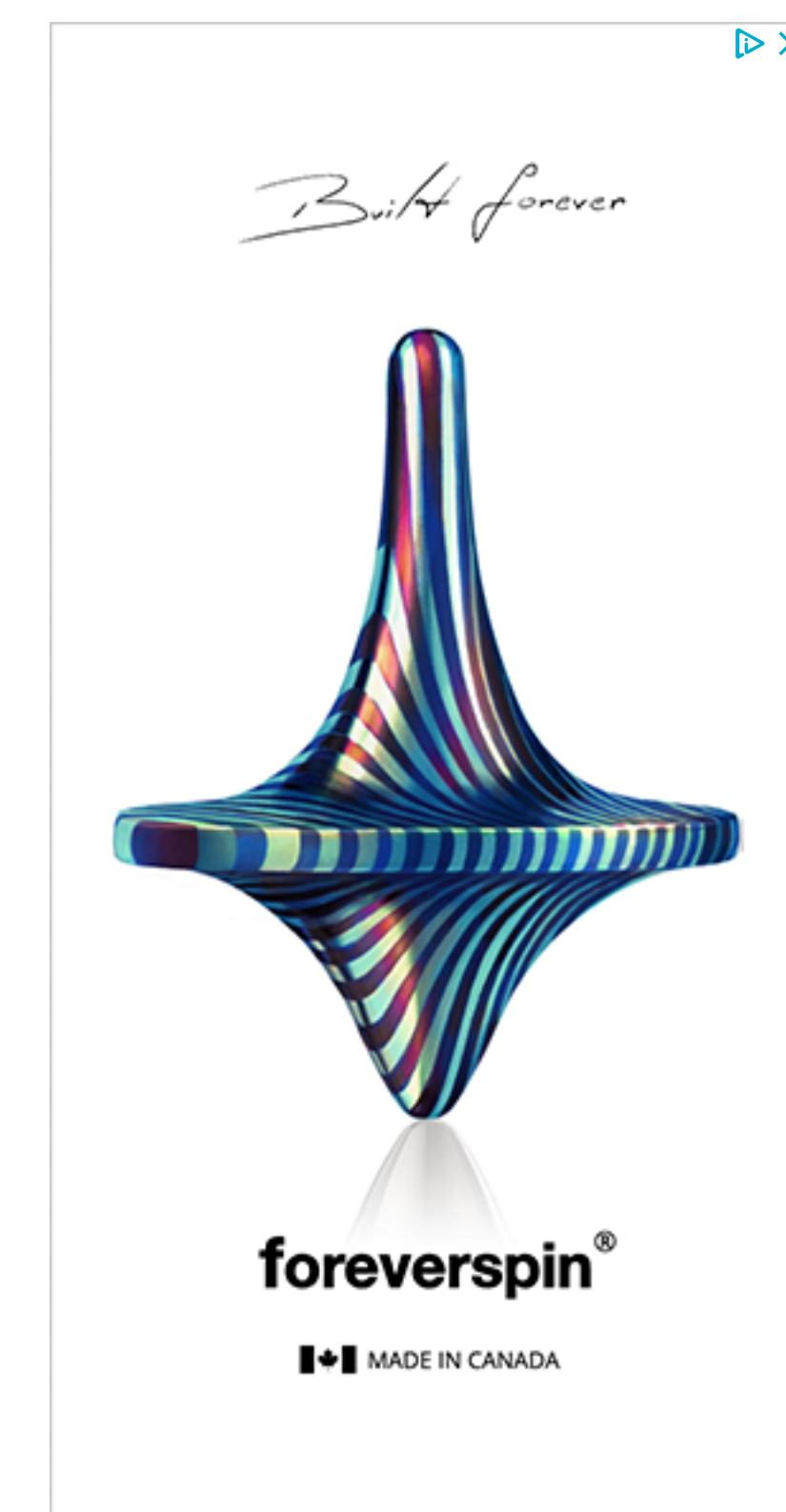
Lie Down may be Oldham's most country record of new songs in years, and it's also one of his most accessible and least academic records. In its loose narrative—of a relationship forged and broken, and of lives reassured—the Loretta Lynn to his Conway Twitty is Ashley Webber, whose full-throated, feminine roar contrasts with Oldham's old-man croon. "So Everyone", with its solemn horns and ratchety percussion (either a washboard or spoons), relates the excitement of new love through a plea for public oral sex, but there's neither a giggly nudge nor an admission of transgressiveness. In fact, the song sounds positively romantic. Of course, their second duet, "You Want That Picture", portrays a romance in shambles, each accusing the other of betrayal in a he-said/she-said dialogue.

Oldham certainly sees a darkness, but *Lie Down* ends basking in holy light. A Baptist organ illuminates the hymnlike closer "I'll Be Glad", a paean to God's own reliability. As it reaches its final refrain, a full choir joins Oldham for a few short, sweet chords that serve as a sort of benediction. Coming at the end of an album full of moral, romantic, and sexual gray areas, those closing notes sound genuinely redemptive—not just a preordained conclusion, but a powerful and hard-won finale. *If Lie Down in the Light* sounds like the distillation of the themes and sounds Oldham has been tinkering with throughout his career, the result, as he sings on "Easy Does It", is "good earthly music singing into my head."

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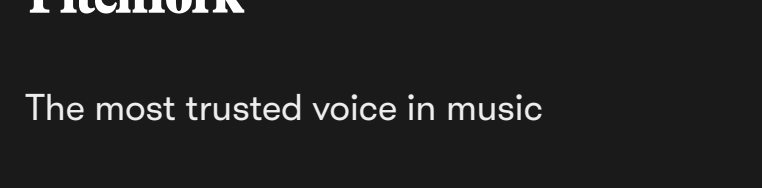
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