









NEWSLETTER

By Mike Powell

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Kurt Wagner and co.'s masterful 11th album is one of the best to emerge from their strange, modest universe.

For the first 20 seconds of Mr. M, all the listener will hear is the sound of a string section, gliding, pretty, and warm, like something from an old Disney movie. The strings are followed by brushed, rolling snare drums. Soon, Kurt Wagner, the band's singer, stumbles into the mix. "Don't know what the fuck they talk about," he sings. His voice sounds beery and disoriented. It seems possible that he's in the wrong room.

Coming from some singers, the line might sound like a challenge, but coming from Wagner, it's a simple admission. <u>Lambchop</u> is a band that has spent the past 20 years in Nashville building its own idiosyncratic universe. For better and worse, the current state of music, its trends and its innovations, pass them by completely. Even during the days when alt-country seemed like a viable art form, Wagner's ornery sense of humor-- the kind that drives you to cap your album with a 40-second-long song called "I Sucked My Boss' Dick"-- made them seem totally out-ofstep with their supposed contemporaries. In a lot of ways, Lambchop is a band that seems committed to its own irrelevance.

Irrelevance, though, isn't a burden for Lambchop as much as it is a jumping off point for what makes them them. "I see your Pitchfork I-rock saviors," goes one line on 2006's <u>Damaged</u>-- "I'm sorry, I still prefer Jim Nabors." If you aren't sure who Jim Nabors is and you're still reading our reviews about I-rock saviors, you've unknowingly participated in Wagner's self-definition: He hears the conversation going on but damn if he'll take part in it. Nothing on Mr. M is designed to pop, not in the conventional sense of the word. To describe the

band's current style is to invoke genres with an almost negative cultural cachet: lounge, 1970s country, Burt Bacharach-- styles so fixated on sounding high-class that they run the risk of feeling trashy. On paper, Lambchop is a band that would appeal primarily to grandparents and drunks.

Wagner's voice is a low, wounded-sounding instrument whose character has only deepened with time (though Wagner, in his self-effacing Wagnerian way, has attributed it to cigarettes). At root, he's a crooner, but his croon sounds alternately fragile and gruff-- the elderly neighbor who returns your lost dog one day and commands you to step off his azaleas the next, spittle hanging from his lip.

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the elements, taking pictures of our phones" is one. "Sleep makes you possible" is another. His writing has the power to transform the everyday into a mystery, but his voice-- and the music behind it-- attempts to transform the mystery into something unplugged and emotionally direct-- to make "The wine tasted like sunshine in a basement" sound a little bit like "I love you." If Lambchop's music bears some essential ambition, it's to marry ambivalence and

His lyrics are a mix of minor, concrete observations and poetic flights. "We have crawled among

sentimentality. My favorite turn on Mr. M is on "Buttons", a portrait of a small-town loser by a narrator who seems to neither love nor hate the man he sings about. "Been better times for those that are in trouble," Wagner sings, "and maybe there'll be better times for you. The weight you've gained has made your head a bubble, and your button eyes are brown and not her-- black and blue."

On the last words-- "black and blue"-- Wagner's voice warps into an almost grotesque croon, like

he's either about to giggle or weep over the string section, and yet the image in my head is of

a pudgy, small-town loser and the woman who he may or may not have beaten with his own sad fists. What we are supposed to do with these mixed emotional cues, I have no idea. It's to Lambchop's credit that their music avoids comfortable resolutions. Instead, it hangs there, no moral, no judgment. Apprehending Mr. M does not take a genius, nor does it take an English degree, nor does it take 180-gram vinyl and an \$800 Scandanavian turntable with counterweights made out of rare geodes. What it does take, I think, is patience. I like tarted-up, throat-grabbing music as much as

the next frantically inattentive twentysomething. I also find a deep satisfaction in Lambchop's subtlety, which never makes the mistake of thinking that being high-minded or instructive will get us over to their weird team. Nobody, not even the most depraved among us, needs to be slapped on the wrist in order to see beauty. And still, despite Wagner's protests that he doesn't know what the fuck they talk about, *Mr. M* sounds aware of itself as an argument-- an argument for the kind of patience the music on it demands. And so we return to this idea of Lambchop's irrelevance. For the purpose of barroom reductions, Mr. M sounds like a bunch of guys tapping delicately on acoustic instruments from deep within

a mausoleum, or the sound of wind blowing gently through the pages of an open book resting on

a front-porch rocking chair. But how rare is it that a band asks you to listen to so little, and how

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much rarer is it that they make it sound like so much?

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