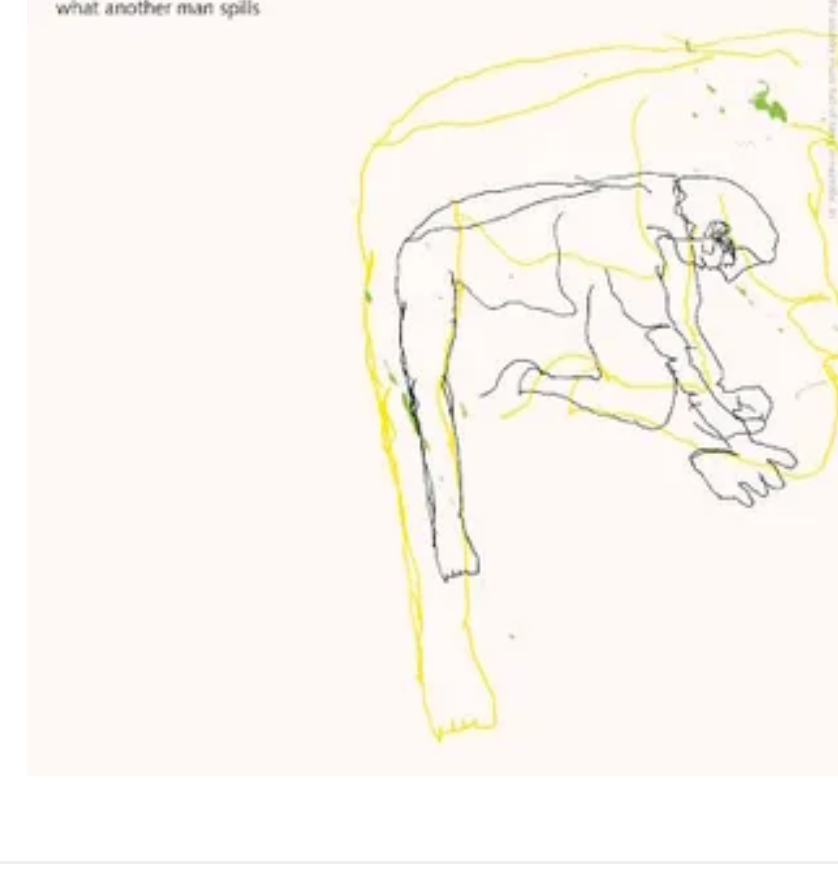


ALBUMS

What Another Man Spills

Lambchop

1998



8.2

By Stephen M. Deusner

GENRE: Rock LABEL: Merge REVIEWED: August 11, 2018

On this sparkling reissue of an early career highlight, the act that billed itself as “the most fucked-up country band in Nashville” revels in the ecstasy of influence.

“Visit the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, TN.” That short, direct advertisement has appeared in the packaging of almost every Lambchop full-length, but it’s perhaps most prominent on 1998’s *What Another Man Spills*, where it appears on the front cover. Barely noticeable on the translucent vellum of the original CD, the words are unmissable on the new LP reissue. It’s an odd exhortation, as Lambchop do not sound much like any country band past or present. Frontman [Kurt Wagner](#) has said that the message was “a way of emphasizing that this was a band from Nashville and they are of this place and in a way it would remind people of our Nashville-ness and our ties of being from here.”

Lambchop have had a weird relationship with both the city and the country genre ever since they proclaimed themselves “the most fucked-up country band in Nashville.” They incorporate pedal steel, guitars that sound like Chet Atkins and [Glen Campbell](#), even sophisticated string arrangements that look backwards to the more urbane Nashville Sound of the 1960s. But Wagner sings with no definable twang, and his subject matter only occasionally dovetails with that of mainstream country radio. So it sounds like a joke, the idea of Lambchop as a country band: If you lived in Nashville, what other kind of band could you possibly be?

Spills was released at a moment when Nashville represented something awful and fake and calculated to the roots-rock weirdos who subscribed to *No Depression*. (“[Fuck this town!](#)” goes the [Robbie Fulks](#) anthem from 1997.) Proudly identifying with the capital of country music was subversive and perhaps even self-deprecating in the late 1990s, never mind that Wagner evinced no knowledge of mainstream country. He genuinely loved those old, forgotten records, preferring [Jim Nabors to your indie rock saviors](#) and accepting how out of touch that made him look.

Building on the dense, lustrous, yet still punk-indebted sound of 1997’s *Thriller*, *What Another Man Spills* does two things that ought to be oppositional, if not downright irreconcilable: First, Lambchop set themselves up as something resembling a real band, as opposed to a loose assortment of day laborers, music-biz civilians, and whoever else happened to show up to record on a given day. Second, they blow that band to smithereens. “It was a big step toward our acting and sounding something more akin to a professional music entity in both sound recording and the approach to the songs we were making,” Wagner writes in the new liner notes. Loose and gangly, with an air of why-the-hell-not experimentation in every song, the album nonetheless sounds more determined, more focused, more *professional* than anything else they’d done so far.

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As such, the music is encoded with the trappings of this phase in the band’s history—not only what they were listening to in the late ’90s, but most of all who they were associating with. To repay [Yo La Tengo](#) for taking them out on tour, Lambchop cover “It’s Not Alright,” by James McNew’s side project [Dump](#). The album art is courtesy of [Vic Chesnutt](#), who also plays on a few songs: Lambchop had recently backed the Athens singer-songwriter on his sixth album, *The Salesman & Bernadette*. And they reinterpret two songs by F.M. Cornog, a.k.a. [East River Pipe](#), who had just become their Merge labelmate. There’s a bleary majesty to “Life #2,” especially when the pedal steel scissors through the chorus, and “King of Nothing Never” brings rambunctious energy to match a self-loathing so fantastical that it becomes a kind of self-love. Together, they comprise an advertisement akin to the one for the Country Music Hall of Fame: Listen to East River Pipe.

In 2018, the closing track plays like an unintentional eulogy. “Theme to ‘The Neil Miller Show,’” by bass player [Marc Trowillon](#), has a boisterous party vibe similar to the [Bar-Kays](#)’ “[Soul Finger](#).” Someone keeps shouting for the band to get their asses into the studio and play the song, enjoying it so much that he calls everybody back in for one last pass through the coda: “C’moon man, let’s get down!” Perhaps because of his songwriting credit, and definitely because of his prominent bassline, I always pictured Trowillon as that ringleader. It’s a lovely and lively moment, all the more poignant five years after Trowillon’s death, and it speaks to why all of these people are making music together in the first place: Call it country or fucked-up country or whatever, but there’s an invigorating sense of camaraderie in these songs, a palpable joy in creation, and an excitement to find out what’s over that next musical hill.

Much of that has to do with [Mark Nevers](#), a longtime band member who had stepped into the role of producer. He booked sessions around Nashville during studios’ weekend off-hours, securing a better rate to make a more expensive-sounding album. To say that *Spills* has a rich, lush, variegated sound would be an understatement: Especially on this new LP, remastered from the original DAT tapes, the music sounds so good that you get distracted by certain elements: that deep, lovely guitar that interrupts periodically; that tectonic bass saxophone on “King of Nothing Never”; the trembling marimba on “Scamper” (inspired, reportedly, by Wagner’s job as a floor sander). If this is indeed country music, then it’s built on the refined sounds associated with Owen Bradley and [Chart Records](#), not the slick hat acts or even the alt-country insurgents of the era. It’s museum country rather than mainstream or alt.

Even as they settle into this newfound professionalism and cement the Lambchop sound, they work to explode that sound, constantly nudging at its boundaries and sometimes pushing aggressively against them. Along with the graceful smears of pedal steel, there are string arrangements all but quoted from old Blaxploitation soundtracks. The rhythm section is tight in its approximation of funk, and occasionally Wagner breaks into a laryngeal falsetto. As its title implies, this is a covers-heavy album, but instead of Little Jimmy Dickens or [George Jones](#), Lambchop tackle [Curtis Mayfield](#)’s “Give Me Your Love (Lover Song)” and “I’ve Been Lonely for So Long” by the underrated [Stax](#) artist Frederick Knight. There’s none of the distance or detachment in these covers that, in the ’90s, could mask a fear of failure; Lambchop embrace these songs and the traditions they represent unreservedly, as though Mayfield’s superfly orchestrations were a big-city cousin to hillbilly music.

In fact, one of the best moments on *Spills* comes halfway through “I’ve Been Lonely for So Long,” when Wagner delivers Knight’s spoken-word overture: “Yes, I’ve been lonely. You never know the real meaning of peace and harmony. Yeah.” Perhaps because the cover was recorded during a decade so closely associated with irony, that interlude has the feel of a high-wire guitar solo, where one wrong note might bring everything to a screeching halt. But Wagner never betrays a smirk. This is an album about love—romantic love, sure, but mostly musical love. Lambchop emerge on this record as a band that reaches out into the world, that collects what another man spills and makes something new and warm out of it. This is an album about the joy of influence, not the burden.

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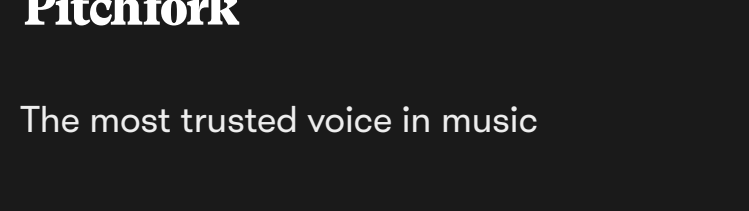
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