



ALBUMS

Bright Flight

Silver Jews

2001



8.5

GENRE: Rock LABEL: Drag City REVIEWED: November 28, 2001

As the story goes, the first time Carl Sandburg visited Carl Sandburg High School in his home state of Illinois ...

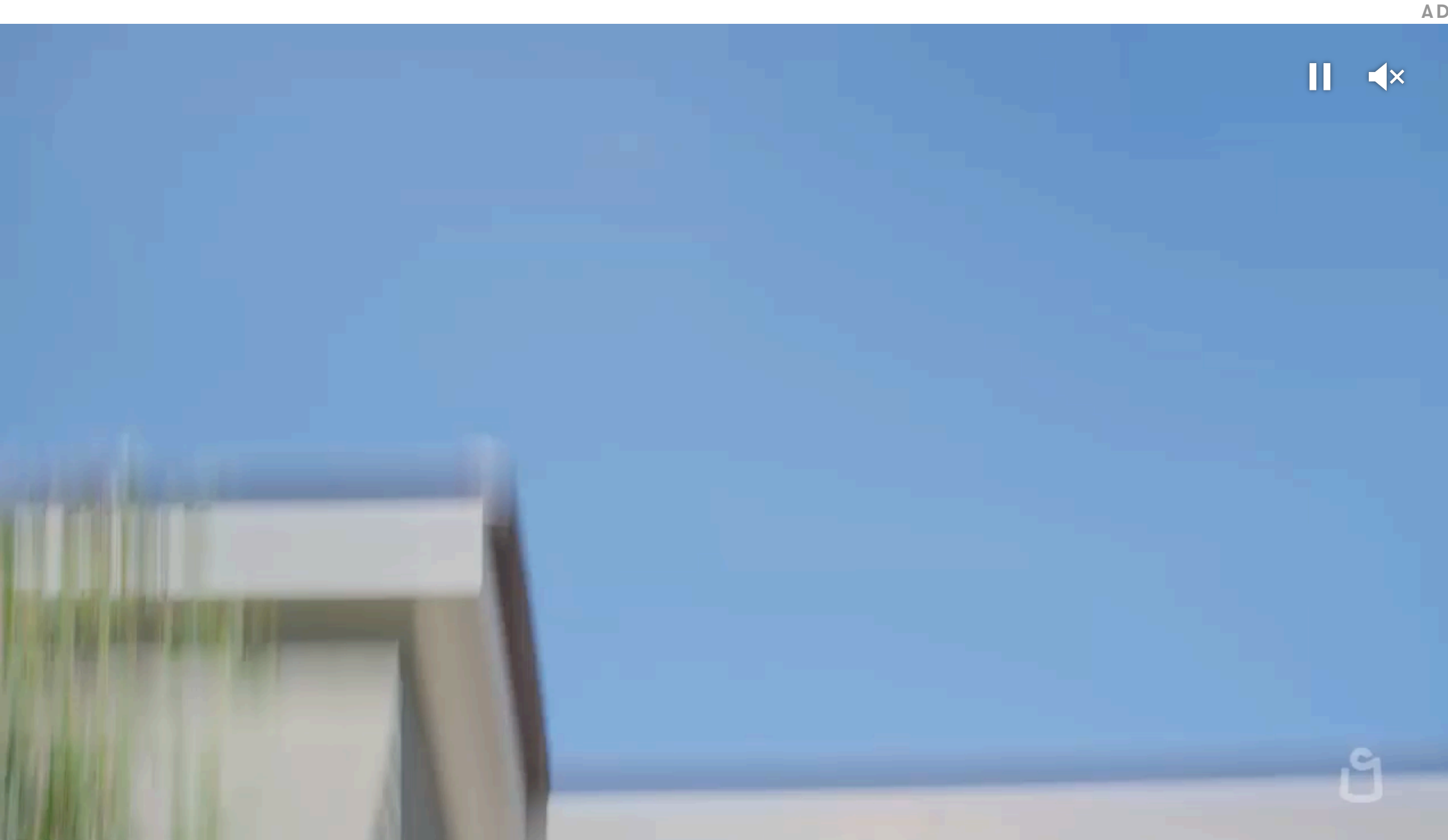
As the story goes, the first time Carl Sandburg visited Carl Sandburg High School in his home state of Illinois he was mistaken for a bum off the street and promptly ordered to leave the premises. School officials quickly learned their mistake and all sorts of ass-kissing inevitably ensued. Sandburg, it is said, was gracious and extremely considerate through the whole thing. Now whether this story is apocryphal or not I'm not sure, but it illustrates a couple of points: 1) most of the time, style rules over substance, and 2) poets don't really seem to give a shit.

These days, style is everything, and since the introduction of MTV, the situation in the music business has only deteriorated further with each passing year. I'm convinced that if Janis Joplin were born twenty-five years later, she'd be stuck working in a Waffle House somewhere off of I-75. Of course, if you're a poet, none of that matters to you-- hardly anybody reads your stuff anyway, and if you also happen to be a musician on the side, well, either people like you or they don't. At least that's the way Dave Berman seems to see things.

The Silver Jews have just released *Bright Flight*, the follow-up to 1998's great *American Water*. Berman moved to Nashville to record *Bright Flight*, and the influence is apparent throughout the entire album. He's absorbed the local country and alt-country scene, and integrated it with his own wry, lo-fi aesthetic to kick out ten new tracks of intelligent backwoods swagger. Stephen Malkmus doesn't appear on the album so the sense of comradeship that gave *American Water* so much life isn't here, and consequently, *Bright Flight* sounds like more of a personal statement, mixing the cathartic grandeur of "Tonight's the Night" with the striking imagery of early modernist poetry. Berman is a writer, first and foremost, who happens to write music, but doesn't enjoy touring to promote it. As a result, the Jews don't go out of their way to impress anyone. It's this easy-going amiability combined with their frontman's erudition that makes them so affecting.

"When God was young, he made the wind and the sun/ Since then, it's been a slow education," kicks off the album, and it's typical of the types of musings scattered through all of the Silver Jews' records. "Slow Education" is loose, imbued with steel guitar and country rock wistfulness, and it also introduces Cassie Marrett as a doubling voice on the choruses, who graces Berman's deadpan delivery. Sounding a little green, she also backs and sings a verse of "Tennessee," serving the part of Nicolette Larson to Neil Young, or Emmylou Harris to Bob Dylan. Much of the rest of the album continues in the same vein, only departing for the disappointing guitar romp "Transylvania Blues" (which can't match Malkmus' showpiece, "Night Society," from the last album) and the boisterous "Let's Not and Say We Did."

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Bright Flight has some great moments, and two tracks in particular form the heart of the album. "I Remember Me," a black Edgar Lee Masters-style American vignette that manages to describe a young love born ("The moon was worn just slightly on the right, they slow danced so the needle wouldn't skip"), lost during a coma ("On the bank of the road 'neath the cottonwoods, he turned to her to ask if she'd marry him when a runaway truck hit him where he stood"), and finally remembered ("He bought a little land with the money from the settlement and even bought the truck that had hit him that day. He touched the part where the metal was bent"). Berman even throws in the striking line, "A black hawk nailed to the sky/ And the tape hiss from the trees," to sweeten the deal.

"Time Will Break the World," with its snarling, repeated refrain ("All my poor hungry children") chills in a way a lesser band like Sixteen Horsepower could never pull off. The song is filled with feverish feedback and apocalyptic visions: "Tanning beds explode with rich women inside" and "The icicles are dripping like the whole house is weeping on an evil little car with gull-wing doors. And I have no idea what drives you mister, but I've killed you in my mind so many times before." It's a powerful song that I played probably twenty times during the first two days I had the record.

Now that we Pavement fans can't look forward to any more of that band's albums, Silver Jews and Stephen Malkmus releases are the biggest events of the year. Here's to hoping we don't have to wait so long for the next revelation. But if Dave Berman prefers to concentrate on his poetry, I don't have much advice to offer except, if you do happen to have a high school named after you, for god's sake Dave, at least wear a tie when you visit.

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