

Mp3 Pale Boy - Pop: Quirky



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Idiosyncratic, inventive songs, at once lyrical and raw, performed with strong musicianship unorthodox instrumentation (bass clarinet, French horn, violin, vibes, flugelhorn) 18 MP3 Songs POP: Quirky, CLASSICAL: Contemporary Details: Misfit City (London) Review by Dann Chinn Apparently what fires Seth Geltman up is Astor Piazzolla - fiery, complex, challenging music, stirring feet into instinctive dance. But it's a stiller, smaller flame that Piazzolla's lit in Geltman's heart. His own songwriting is a more reserved thing altogether. You could compare what Seth Geltman and Thomas Blomster do with Pale Boy to what Stephen Merritt does with Magnetic Fields: "from the brain straight through the heart - the shortest distance", as Geltman puts it. Although not as accessible (or Broadway-bound) as Merritt's, his songwriting's similarly sophisticated; cerebral, sometimes difficult for ears attuned to pure pop. Dark closeted harmonies abound; melodies fade into shadowy doubts rather than aspiring. An air of introversion and dry, wounded carefulness is always present. If Spice Girls had Geltman's number, they wouldn't call it. If Stephen Sondheim did, he might. Pale Boy's delicate and mannered debut is loaded with thought and detail, with life constantly being breathed in by Blomster's exquisite arrangements: a chamber-orchestra palette of fluttering jazz and flamenco guitars, violins, reeds and brass plus Blomster's own piano, ever-crisp drumming and knack for tuned percussion. Drawing on latter-day classical, jazz, and the area where the two blend together, this is music fleshed out with the same kind of light, miniaturist detail as Penguin Cafe Orchestra. Geltman handles most of the singing, his light bloodless voice as untouchable and inflection-free as Leonard Cohen's and as transparent as blown newsprint. And though Pale Boy are Denver-based, their spiritual home is European - an autumnal imaginary Paris of skating rinks, cafe culture and falling leaves, or the ascerbic Germany that Brecht and Weil knew. Or a hundred points between Moscow and San Francisco where dispossessed Old Worlders with shabby

coats and battered instrument cases laid down their baggage and played for a while... Think that. Then factor in a touch of Smog, with trailer parks, makety hotels and bad teeth replaced by faded, once-grand apartments and battered books. That nails the Pale Boy world as closely as anything. Apart from the other occasional touchstone, Love's "Forever Changes" - intricate folk strumming, surging orchestras, and dreamy heads running up against barriers. "Just A Thought" (in which Geltman, up to his knees in toil, casts his mind free overslinking brass and woodwind) hints at "Aloneagainor" in mingling innocence and frustration - "There's so much more than the grind every day, / there's the blue and the cats and the letter K. / Far from the chatter and the money hunt, / there's a thought of an autumn afternoon." A darker taste of Love, mingled with twelve-tone operetta, enters "Promise Me", shading it into a moody resignation: "Promise me obscurity / Turn out the spotlight... / Come and go but never leave. / Let me make my best guess how to ride your slippery lines, / you fleeting joking prayer." Best of all is the sweet express-train violins, budding trumpets and John Adams throb of "It's Good", the point where Pale Boy succumb to instinct ("Over all this sprawling mess, / rising slow in the abdomen, / taking hold of what we know. / Is this another fine mess / or an opulent waltz in the wrong direction?") and where a new note of assurance enters Geltman's voice: "Yes, it's good. / Just sit tight, / wait for light..." Here and everywhere in this painstakingly adult music you can sense the cracks and draughts betraying a succumbing to those unexpected currents and shamings that toy with stable lives and clean ambitions - "Facts march all over an ordinary day / Paper's got nothing to say except scandals, sports, atrocities... / Scattered friction everywhere." The understated title track buries itself under a forgettable melody, but its vivid lyric (of lost directions, of a hectoring young man engulfed by a stifling fence) penetrates deeper. "Acrobat" is cutting and unforgiving, a bored audience turning away from a "gaudy little crackpot showing off with all his might" and ignoring him as he heads into his fatal fall. Bossa-nova and muted brass line "October Hat", a surreal ballet of one man's misdirected attempt to capture the sense of his life in a scribbled sonnet lost to the sea. "Well, you made your point, / and the only audience that mattered never showed up" Geltman murmurs pointedly on "Hum In The Clouds", as stormtossed lounge jazz rolls around him and wrestles with Reich xylophone, and the debris of divorce bangs into both ("What did you think would happen? Why did you leave so soon? / Do you know how much was missed and lost on those Saturday afternoons?") Throughout, mixed feelings and shifting views are struggling for dominance; as in "Wearing Your Time Out", when patient drudgery gives way to "the corner of your eye / going suddenly awry / after getting lost

on lines of reason." The ambiguity's caught best in a trio of songs sung by Jeana Dodge, whose restrained classical soprano lends them an affectingly uptight and anxious yearning. On "Underside Of A Terrible Thought", an unspecified angst is picked apart with determination, disgust and fascination ("Hold it high in the muddy light... / Hold your nose and hold it very tight... / It warms your brain and quickens your blood... / this twisted tangled orphan"). "Almost"s light, mournful marriage waltz illustrates profoundly thankful love, ever-so-slightly sullied by restlessness and defensiveness - "Almost a connection that couldn't exist. / Almost all I need to subsist." And the polite cadences and lullaby-vibraphone of "All We're Left With" show compressed resentment seeping from the civilised rubble of a relationship - "Kept my patience, bought the flowers, went to college, put out fires... / brought home bacon, / scrubbed the windows... / and I followed the rules." Less successful are attempts at straightforward anger, sapping Pale Boy of spirit and tunes. "Ton Of Blue" gropes at the lovelorn existential dread of the deepest blues, but only sulks, morose and snappish, in its conservatoire setting. And in spite of precise, venomous lyrics and Blomster's poignant arrangement of funeral reeds, "I Hate You" greys out into dull minimalism. No - Pale Boy's understated emotions fare better with subtler, more complex bonds and empathies. Endearing, awkward eroticism nibbles at the floating, detached spring dream of "Shy Beast"; and the wistful, tearjerking strings and muffled brass of "I Know What You're Thinking" make it a Scott Walker fall-apart thing, with Geltman singing at his gentlest. "I know you've been drinking / from the oldest hope that ever was. Rising up through your spine, / flowing through the brain and through the heart, the part glowing... / And I know what you're thinking - / 'Get me through this jagged night'." By the time "Stay Hidden" makes a quiet and wary bid for intimacy, with Geltman pursuing truth with all the extra senses of the once-bitten ("it leaks its news through unsuspecting clues, / it lies in wait for all of us"), those cracks and gaps have been assuaged by something. Perhaps the still, small sound of a hopeful trumpet. This album's not for everyone; but if you've silently burned, quietly frayed or seen something dear to you stretch out of your gentle grasp, it'll strike up a little chord in you.

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