

## Mp3 Ho-hum - Near And Dear



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Non-emulatory arkansas folk rock? 11 MP3 Songs ROCK: Folk Rock, POP: Power Pop Details: MUSIC

Ho-Hum's Near and Dear By Kevin Canfield (New York Press) Near and Dear Ho-Hum (Playadel) A little less than a year ago after the Strokes hysteria had run its course but before we were all subjected to that awful Springsteen record-the national media told readers that it had discovered the site of rock's Next Big Thing. The indie movement of the moment was occurring in, of all places on the planet, Omaha, NE. Big, glossy magazines weighed in with breathless pieces on Omaha bands like Cursive and the Faint, and Bright Eyes frontman Conor Oberst, he of the perfectly mussed hair, big doleful eyes and increasingly smug social consciousness, emerged as a full-blown Gen-Y cover boy. The Cornhusker State seemed like a weird place for an alt-rock revival, but not as unlikely, perhaps, as Little Rock, AR. The taste-making rock critics have yet to descend on the city that gave us Clinton, Whitewater and all else that was right and wrong about America of the 1990s. But assuming these things are based on merit, not just p.r., those same critics will soon be trumpeting Little Rock artists like the magnificent Ho-Hum. Near and Dear, released this month to absolutely no fanfare, is the sixth album from Ho-Hum (brothers Lenny and Rod Bryan, Samuel Heard and Brad Brown). It is a deeply catchy and layered disc, built on an amalgamation of influences, from the Pixies and Sonic Youth to Miracle Legion and XTC. The record comes at a time when the band is celebrating something of a creative renaissance and, while they're at it, enjoying their freedom from the viscous grip of major label glad-handers. In 1996-not long after Universal Records released Ho-Hum's first album, Local-the band's four members felt they were ready to put out a followup. The label insisted on installing its own producers for the second record, and before long the band decided the situation was unworkable; they opted out of their contract with Universal and began a five-year journey that took them from a mega-major-label to the smallest of small record labels. Two years ago,

after releasing a pair of discs with HTS Records, the band started its own label, Playadel; Near and Dear is the label's fifth release. What's extraordinary about Near and Dear-and it is truly an extraordinary record-is the degree to which the band seems capable of doing almost anything. "I'm-A-Waking Up," the first song, is a swirling, triumphant riff on indifference and self-discovery, constructed around unobtrusive keyboard warbling and rhythmic drumming. It builds slowly, but by mid-song Lenny Bryan lets go with a howling coda for his apathetic youth: "Here's to hands holding you just like they want to hold me/Pray to yourselves you pirates of peace unfaithfully/Shame on myself for sleeping through the start of my life/I'm waking up to the best of peculiar life." The second track, "Ordinary People," is as infectious as the first, but sonically quite different. Four-plus minutes of buoyant, almost bouncy pop-the guitars jangle and crunch, the synth skips right along-it does more with a simple five-word refrain than has any song in recent memory. "I came on very strong," Lenny Bryan repeats three times, emphasizing every second syllable before adding an emphatic "Indeed." Elsewhere, the polymath quartet plays straight-ahead punk-tinged rock ("Handheld" sounds like it would've fit in on Death to the Pixies), unabashed love songs ("Corny"), winsome synth-pop ("NearandDear") and gleefully bitter breakup songs ("Land Ho!"). This is an outstanding record from an unpretentious band. There is not a Conor Oberst among them.

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