

Bowerbirds

Societies sometimes sing their best songs for centuries. Consider that antediluvian American lament "Goodbye, Old Paint," or the worn murder ballads of the Appalachians, which still send shivers down spines and inspire new renditions, variations and song cycles. Ancient as they may be, these tunes still resonate emotionally, echoing some feeling each of us has likely felt.

The best songs of North Carolina's Bowerbirds have always seemed equally eternal. Coruscated by Beth Tacular's bird song and Phil Moore's environmentalist empathy, "In Our Talons" was, at its core, a quest for solidarity in a world of closing shadows. "Northern Lights" painted a pained portrait of love shrouded in doubt as perfectly as Cash, Dylan or Cohen ever have. These felt like more than songs; they felt like treasures.

But those recordings were made on the quick and the cheap, with nylon-stringed guitars, fiddle lines and drum patterns that became comfortable. You could imagine these songs as old stateside standards, because, really, that's how they sounded--campfire anthems sung by a couple clinging to very deep love.

The Clearing is the third album by the Bowerbirds, and as is often the case for bands that have found steady success, they had more time and better resources to make it. This is a bigger record, then, with bolder sounds and a broader scope. "Tuck The Darkness In" surges in its final two minutes with a wall of electric guitars and drums. "Hush" plays hide and seek with restless vibraphones, pianos and drums, Beth's voice again providing a core of resilience in an otherwise ominous atmosphere.

Thing is, these songs don't cede to the increased production demands. The guitars and strings, codas and bridges simply make these thoughts more urgent, more vital and more necessary, but not one bit less permanent. Though "Walk the Furrows" is more complicated than anything the Bowerbirds have ever recorded, the kernel of the song--a new creed for retrenched domesticity in a world flooded with temptation and distraction--feels like bedrock.

The Clearing is more than a third record for the Bowerbirds. Between 2009's Upper Air and this one, Beth nearly died after a mysterious illness that put her in the hospital. They rescued and adopted a dog that ran beneath their tour van's tires. Beth and Phil even ended their long relationship but began it again after realizing that, despite their own shortcomings, they didn't want to be with anyone else. Mostly, though, they returned to their cabin in the woods of North Carolina to nest--to make soup and walk dogs, to make art and write songs, to realize that this was their life and find contentment in it.

For the Bowerbirds, The Clearing represents the perfect realization of a fresh, timely outlook. Here, there's acceptance with ambition, patience with aspirations, understanding with intelligence. On The Clearing, Phil and Beth sing of the best and most important moments of their life and, in turn, create new ones. In this blistering world, these songs are the rarest sort of balm.

The Clearing was recorded with Brian Joseph in Wisconsin's treasured new studio, April Base, and with the help of some righteous microphones in a tiny, battered North Carolina cabin built by freed slaves during Reconstruction. The Clearing was mixed by Nicolas Vernhes in New York's Rare Book Room. The Clearing is available on Dead Oceans starting March 6, 2012--and, subsequently, forever. --Grayson Currin