

## Fol Chen – *Part II: The New December*

For its second album, Highland Park sextet Fol Chen presents *Part II: The New December*, songs of malaise and miscommunication set to dark pop and glitch-riddled chamber funk. Since the band's inception, Fol Chen has remained a mysterious entity – its membership disguised by masks and aliases, its lyrics appearing as transmissions from a fictional world. But just as the on-album narrative has congealed in bits and pieces, the group's real-life story has grown in tangible ways.

Fol Chen's wildly eclectic 2009 debut, *Part I: John Shade, Your Fortune's Made*, spawned some healthy praise (from NPR, no less), a remix album (featuring No Kids and Junior Vasquez, among others), a BBC session, and a video collaboration with the Laker Girls. It also paved the way for a pair of uniquely inspired covers: Prince's "The Beautiful Ones" (recorded for *Spin*) and Pink Floyd's "In The Flesh" (for *Mojo*). Fol Chen's bent, blackened takes on the pop eccentrics of yore provided fresh context for its own kaleidoscopic songs, and *The New December* shores up the group's slippery identity further still. This is Fol Chen's most focused work – as consistent as it is consuming, as enjoyable as it is unusual.

The plot, steeped in a Bowie-esque sense of puckish melodrama, picks up with the malevolent John Shade vanquished. Unfortunately, the struggle alluded to in *Part I* has left Fol Chen's world frayed – covered in ash, plagued by acid rain – and its population dazed. The members of Fol Chen, once a ragtag team of insurgents, are now bureaucrats forced to sit back and watch as the cipher they relied upon to defeat Shade mutates into a virus that eats words indiscriminately. Things unravel as *The New December* progresses, with Fol Chen enlisting a handful of familiar voices – Angus and Aaron of Liars, L.A. chanteuse Kárin Tatoyan, singer-songwriter Simone White – to help tell the tale.

The album opens with "The Holograms," where shards of piano, pounding percussion and drifting frequencies coagulate into an upbeat tune about the treachery of memory. Tatoyan takes lead on "In Ruins" – whose playful escapism recalls Fol Chen's earlier hit, "Cable TV" – as an Eastern melody rings out from a *Midnight Vultures*-ish mélange of cutup funk, fuzz bass and tinkling ivories. Two songs later, on "This I Where The Road Begins" a lurking darkness closes in while the Liars boys breathe pestilence over an instrumental whose beats, strings and atmosphere bring to mind Hood or The Notwist.

The band's grand architects – Samuel Bing and Julian Wass – are masters of mood and composition, building Fol Chen's inimitable songs out of sound fragments sourced from live instrumentation and often siphoned through the sampler of an old Casio SK-1. Fittingly, *The New December* sidesteps genre at every turn. On "C/U" Fol Chen's Patrick-Ian croons like a wayward member of New Edition; Simone White's turn on "Adeline" brings Sterolab to mind; "They Came To Me" is a careening dance track à la Hot Chip. Still, an aural through-line exists – Fol Chen calls it "discosis" – mimicked by the narrative.

To wit, on the album's titular closer, all that shuffling and shuddering ceases, replaced by a dreamlike haze. Bing's voice rings out but the words are indiscernible. John Shade is a memory, but memory without words is meaningless. The picture softens further, and further still, until... silence.