

Midlake

Midlake stays ahead of its own time by making music that transcends it. The Denton, Texas band's 2006 release *The Trials of Van Occupanther*, an inspired set of woozy, psychedelic pastoral rock, got fans and bloggers re-evaluating dormant ancestors like Fleetwood Mac, America, Crosby Stills, Nash and Young and Bread—music that has been embedded in the indie world's unconscious (Bon Iver, Fleet Foxes, Grizzly Bear) ever since. On their third album, *The Courage of Others*, Midlake are still themselves and yet completely reinvented, so much so that between the time they started working on the record and the time they finished it, the title track was re-recorded down to every note, simply because they'd turned into a more ambitious band, with new influences both classic and contemporary, from British folk to Russian cinema. "It didn't sound like us anymore," says frontman/songwriter Tim Smith. "There was a lot of, 'check out this idea,' and 'let's get more into this kind of vibe.' Plus we were getting a lot better musically."

Produced and recorded by the band—Smith, guitarists Eric Pulido and Eric Nicholson, drummer McKenzie Smith and bassist Paul Alexander—at their own studio, then mixed by Matt Pence at The Echo Lab, *The Courage of Others* is a stunning distillation of Midlake's gift for sadly gorgeous melodies and ornate soundscapes. Songs like "Winter Dies" and "Core of Nature" have both the epic sweep of early prog-rock and the fingers-on-guitar-strings rawness of acoustic music. To call it "eagerly awaited" is an understatement—the disc appeared on *Under the Radar's* "Most Anticipated Albums" list for both 2008 and 2009.

After coming off the road behind ...*Van Occupanther*, "we spent probably a year just trying to figure out what we wanted to sound like," says Smith. "I guess on average it took about a month per song to record, but that's who we are. That's how long it takes us to figure out the best way to make something beautiful."

Like a lot of bands in Denton, which is just a little north (but certainly not *part*) of Dallas, Midlake had its genesis at the University of North Texas music program—Smith was a trained saxophonist with no history of playing rock or punk—then followed their own muse. "You come up here and there's just people setting up shop in houses playing music—just a community of artists," says Pulido. "It's very magical to me." The Denton scene has caught the ear of Bella Union boss and former Cocteau Twin Simon Raymonde several times; Midlake were first recommended to him by Lift to Experience, while Midlake did the same for their friend and collaborator Robert Gomez.

Once out of school, Smith discovered less is more when it came to writing rock'n'roll. Despite the band's intricate sound and painstaking recording process, his goal as a musician is quite simple. "What we're always trying to achieve," he says, "is a sound that I feel really emotional about." It's a paradox of being in the studio that you don't necessarily get the most natural sound in the most "natural" way—i.e., by recording live. But after Smith brought in a few songs on his four track—a process that, improbably, still makes him nervous—the band set up all together in a room to start. Pulido says they were able to relax un-self-consciously into the music because they knew the finished versions were still many hours and days away. "We work up the songs and then it's like, 'ok, sounds cool, now let's go do the real thing.' Then you start adding more and before you know it—*that's it, that's the track...* and we've recorded it 15 times." This perfectionism is more metaphysical than technical—the band has no problem leaving in a

musical mistake or going back to something from a demo if it contributes to the truest version of the song.

But because of this arduous approach, it wasn't until January of 2009 that *The Courage of Others* really came together—and it took leaving the studio for that to happen. "We just needed a breath of fresh air," says Pulido. "When I was young, I used to go out to this farm (the Sand Hill Ranch, in Buffalo, TX). We'd hunt and fish and cook out. I called up the family that owns it and they let us come hang out." They brought their instruments and some recording gear, to see how it might go in a fresh setting. "We worked on one song ("Core of Nature"), kind of by accident," says Smith. "I didn't really have it all written, but it just turned out." The song's title comes from a Goethe quote that Smith had been using as both inspiration and a kind of placeholder for melody and chord progression. "Then I realized I would never write a better phrase." After returning from this field trip, the entire record came together—a seven or eight month recording process after what you might call 18 months of "pre-production" The opening song, "Acts of Man," even got recorded in a mere five days. "That never happens for us!" says Smith. While some bands play it coy about their inspiration, Smith remains an unabashed lover of music who considers new discoveries a vital part of his creative process. He never shied away from Fleetwood Mac comparisons, and, with increasingly more flute on *The Courage of Others* (a proxy for his original wind instrument, the saxophone, which he doesn't think fits into Midlake's sound) he'll own up to Jethro Tull as well. When you're making confident music that achieves its own originality and beauty, you're not afraid to give credit where its due. British prog-folk bands like Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention, Amazing Blondel and the Strawbs were also in the mix as Smith began to write and demo songs. Plans to incorporate mandolin, mountain dulcimer and auto harp into the new sound didn't go as far as the band initially expected, but the folk vibe did find Nicholson abandoning piano and keyboards, which he'd split time on in the past. What people heard as Americana-ish on *Van Occupanther*, Smith thought of more as the Bavarian Forest or the British countryside. but one song on the new record, "Small Mountain," is inspired by his parent's old place in Bandera, Texas, just outside the Hill Country. All the lyrics have an abstract quality—for Smith, the way they feel matters as much as what they say, but he also includes a lot of physical and geographical rooting: *rain, land, woods, valley, ground, skies*. Though Smith says he didn't know it at the time, "Winter Dies" echoes a lyric by Jimmie Spheeris, the late 1970s cult figure (and brother of the film director Penelope) best known for *Isle of View*. "My favorite album of all time," says Smith. "Nothing can top it. There's just something special about it to me."

Similarly, the album's cover art pays homage to another major favorite: *Andrei Rublev*, the 1966 film by Russian writer and director Andrei Tarkovsky. It was Tarkovsky who once said, "Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual, for the ideal."

And the ideal, well... as *The Courage of Others* also , it doesn't happen overnight.