



Music Review: Caravan Of Thieves - *The Funhouse*

Author: [Richard Marcus](#) — **Published:** Apr 25, 2012 at 7:24 am

With the advent of computers and the accompanying ability to exchange ideas and material over long distances almost instantaneously, popular musicians in North America have had the opportunity to experience a far greater selection of musical influences than prior generations. While the music industry's inherent conservatism has ensured the mainstream hasn't been overly affected, there has been a definite increase in the number of independent musicians looking further afield than their own backyard for inspiration. The best of these groups don't just copy what they hear, but find a way to meld their new influences with the music they grew up with to create something unique.

With their latest release, *The Funhouse* on the [United For Opportunity](#) label, [Caravan Of Thieves](#) gives listeners a great example of this trend in action. First of all there's the band's complement of players. Instead of the standard mixture of bass, guitars, keyboards and drums, Caravan Of Thieves are composed of a core of violin, acoustic bass and acoustic guitar. On this album they've broadened their sound to include, quoting from the notes on their web site, "the kitchen sink and then some." Banjos, ukuleles, resonator guitars and various things that can be banged percussively are the main ingredients in the stew of instruments used, but there are also many unrecognizable and unattributable sounds and noises to be heard throughout the disc. Without a hard copy of the CD attributing each and every squeak and squawk, it's impossible to identify all of them, but to be honest the mystery does add to the album's cachet.

As you can tell by the title, they've built the disc around the central theme of a travelling carnival complete with a funhouse, fortune tellers, rigged games and mysterious dark corners where unexplainable things happen. While the Funhouse of the title and the carnival atmosphere created by the music can be taken literally, they also exist on another level as well. For the world you are ushered into with the opening track, "The Funhouse Entrance", bears many similarities to what's around us everyday, save the perspective has been slightly skewed, as if you're looking at it through one of those funhouse mirrors which distorts reality. However instead of taking reality and twisting it out of shape beyond the point of recognition, they merely change the lens we view events through. The result is a chance to see things from a perspective we don't normally have the opportunity to experience.



Check out "Monster", their fun and tongue-in-cheek take on love songs dealing with the way love can effect somebody. "On the slab down in the basement/In the laboratory/There's a new subject under the covers/I recall the days before the transformation/Before the amputation of my heart....Love made a monster out of me!" Using the whole Frankenstein story as an analogy to describe an obsessive lover is brilliant. Not only does it poke fun at all the broken hearts to be found in most pop music love songs, it's great to hear anybody singing about so-called romantic love in less than glowing terms and in such a macabre manner. Sort of like receiving a Valentine with black borders accompanied by a dozen dead, black roses.



Of course, just to let you know the difference between the world of the Funhouse and the real world, they leave you with a warning to close out the disc. "The Funhouse Exit" makes sure you're prepared and know where the real monsters lurk. "Don't put your feet on the outside dear/There are monsters and goblins and politicians everywhere/...Overcrowded schools with education overseen by ghouls". The list of dangers lurking around corners in the real world goes on to include "doctor's with hatchets" and "bankers and other vultures", all out to take pieces out of you when and however they can. A real horror story if I've ever heard one!

Musically, Caravan Of Thieves has cast a wide net when it comes to their sources of inspiration. One would think because of the composition of the band they would have taken the easy way out of leaning heavily on Romany influences. While there is no doubt they do owe a debt to the Eastern European branch of that musical tradition, you can't help but notice they owe just as much to the music halls and cabarets of pre-WWII Europe. In fact, quite a number of their pieces on this recording put me in mind of Kurt Weill and the music he wrote for Bertolt Brecht's plays in pre-Nazi Germany. Slightly wilder and with perhaps less of a polka influence than Weill's compositions, but the same brash and brassy attitude which challenged audiences and forced them to pay attention to what was being said and done on stage.

However, they don't deny their own musical heritage either. For underneath a great deal of the wild and wooly playing, the music almost constantly swings along to a beat reminiscent of 1920s and '30s jazz. On this disc you can hear influences from the Dixieland stylings of New Orleans to the dance bands of Harlem from those eras. What's really quite amazing though is while this sounds like an incredible hodgepodge of styles and traditions to cram within one recording, an almost sure recipe for chaos, the result is a delight to listen to. Caravan Of Thieves has managed to blend everything together to make a vibrant and exciting sound with twice the energy and intensity of any rock and roll band.

Musically inventive, lyrics full of sly humour and gentle cynicism and all served up on a platter garnished to reflect the dark mysteries of a travelling carnival make this one of the more entertaining listens I've had in a while. It's not often you find a band whose sense of humour and intelligence are matched by both their musical talents and an ability to put spurs to their listener's imaginations. You not only listen to their lyrics and appreciate their music, but you find yourself visualizing the atmosphere they create. When you put this record on, be prepared. You sure won't be in Kansas anymore.

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