



Bouquet - Caravan of Thieves

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As a freelance writer I'm programmed to pitch story/review ideas on a consistent basis. If not, the dogs aren't fed. We sleep in the street. And I don't have the gas money to make it to the next show. Then, there's that tiny thrill that comes about when an assignment comes my way. With album reviews, I get a perverse pleasure when the lack of name recognition allows me to approach the music like a blank slate. No expectations to compare to past glories or missteps. No preconceptions to cloud my mind towards what I'm about to hear. The notes and melodies have the opportunity to swirl around me, offering one pleasurable surprise after another. And that's what happened when I accepted the debut by Caravan of Thieves.

At first glimpse, the band name elicits thoughts of something goth this way comes or a harsh industrial sound akin to Ministry. But it turns out that it's more of a juxtaposition of thoughts -- like a small group of ne'er-do-well musical travelers who focus on subject matter along the shady side of life -- prime examples include "The Butcher's Wife," "Burial at Sea," "Rattlesnake" and the subtly political "Angels in Cages"). Within seconds of opening number, "Ghostwriter," I realize that tagging along with this foursome--led by Deep Banana Blackout guitarist Fuzz--is going to be a rollicking adventure of vibrant gypsy jazz.

The song perfectly sets up what to expect out of this Caravan. In the case of "Ghostwriter," the sound of a typewriter bookends the number and effectively alerts the listener that this is bathed in old-school musicality while the rest of the tune informs us that we're in for more than a nostalgia trip. I think of David Grisman Quartet's Dawg music prowling similar territory but in a more elegant manner. Here, there's a stronger drive to the rhythmic, something that's particularly noticeable on the instrumental "Zu Zu's Petals." On "Box of Charms," the lyrics move from elixirs around the world to mocking the laundry list of cautions that come with the use of prescription drugs. It comes off a little more indulgent and unnecessary than the mix of sharp wit and lean performances found on the other 11 tracks, but these few seconds out of 45 minutes is not enough to ground the overall display of positives.

And when the mood strikes, and it strikes often, the energetic playing contains such an intensity to propel it forward that it borders on an acoustic brand of hardcore. Fuzz, vocalist/guitarist Carrie Sangiovanni violinist Ben Dean, and double-bassist Brian Anderson play as if they're contractually obligated to perform at an underground speakeasy during Prohibition and are ready to bolt once the cops break down the front door. Now, I don't want to give the impression that this is played with such abandon that the material lacks nuance. It definitely shows a healthy

respect to the style from the '30s and '40s plus a strong sense of crafting material to fit the format, but the presentation regularly keeps this from having the smell of something found among moth balls.

"Freaks" best represents this melting pot of gypsy jazz, writing and arrangement. At its core is a smooth pop song with a hummable melody and a chorus to stick in your head. But it's more than a time warp. The quartet infuses it with enough depth that the song gains additional strength as it travels back and forth through the decades, molding the sounds of the past in a manner that they become vital today.

Link:

http://www.jambands.com/CDReviews/content_2009_02_23.03.phtml