

REVIEW: FIRST BAND ON THE MOON BY THE CARDIGANS

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The album starts with the quiet chirp of an imitated bird noise with the song “Your New Cuckoo.” The title foreshadows the feeling for the band by the end of the album. The song continues with subtle, simple guitar riff that ascends forward in the mix as a thumping bass line soon follows. After the fourth phrase of the progression in a major, the song erupts into a disco drum and bass composition that is sure to get listeners’ heads bobbing. The song then switches into a beautiful mixture of major and minor chords during the verse phrases and then settles back to the major progression for the audible chorus parts. After the first chorus, there is a brief, yet captivating music break in which the guitar plays a single note riff while the bass and drums drop out for two measures and come right back in for another verse, this time shorter, and back into the hypnotizing chorus. The melody floats over the musical composition of this song so elegantly with grace and style as Nina Persson sings “I saw you standing there, I stopped and stared, the curly girly smiled, you really were” as she goes on to describe being captivated by a suitable love interest either purely physical, or perhaps more spiritual. The chorus is a beautiful assortment of lalas and “let’s say forever let’s say it’s true” trying to hold on to the feeling that she continues to crave while simultaneously experiencing it. There is a hint of fear as is a natural human instinct

when experiencing something so beautiful in which she explains “I read your lips with fear.” As to where this fear originates, it is never explained overtly but still connects with all the fear people have of being hurt in some way or another. The song ends with a jazz flute being played in the spaces of the drums and bass, taking the place of what would be a guitar solo, and the drums, bass, and flute end rather abruptly on a minor note as the song leads into the next song almost immediately.

“Been It” starts with a quick bass riff and synced drum pattern that cues a melody. The guitar player, Peter Svensson, swings in with a stop riff, like something that one might hear with an old school metal song but in a clean, bright guitar tone, adding a beautiful minor substance to the first verse. An increasing, scale-oriented change supports the pre-chorus and the chorus is brought to life as Persson sings “Who can ask me for more, I’ve been your sister, I’ve been your mistress. Maybe I was your whore, Who can ask me for more?” It is evident that she feels exhausted of both emotional and mental resources. The song circles through the same order enhancing this theme of exhaustion.

“Heartbreaker” begins with Beggins Lagerberg on drums playing a pattern that brings to mind the notion of a Beatles song one has never heard. The bass then begins with a three note riff that rings out. Then the

vocals begin with Persson singing a soft melody over the rest of the music. “No not again, oh what a man, just who I thought that I wanted to have, oh don’t do that, don’t use that bat that’s all it takes to make me falling flat” is what she sings in the first verse of the song, introducing the conflict that will continue throughout the rest. “No, not again, a loser I am, I love you tonight, you are my knight, cure and assure to make me feel alright, tomorrow you’ll find I’m not around, but don’t be uptight cause I loved you last night.” The pre-chorus and chorus begin the next major transition lyrically, in which she describes a complex, conflicting relationship she is having with a man that could possibly be more physical than emotional as she mentions that “tomorrow you’ll find I’m not around, but don’t be uptight cause I loved you last night.” With the pre-chorus lines “no not again, a loser I am,” she suggests that this situation has previously happened to her, but this also suggests that she feels guilty. The guilt to which she refers is in the first lines of the verse: “No not again, oh what a man, just who I thought that I wanted to have.” This points to her realization early on that this man is not the person with whom she thought she would be happy. Although she expresses her dislike for being with this man, she continues their relationship, which only serves to increase her sense of guilt.

Her reasoning for continuing the relationship is expressed in the first few chorus lines. “I love you tonight, you are my knight, cure and assure and make me feel alright.” The tune floats, ascending and descending, to give an eerie, uneasy feeling that simultaneously explains her dependency

on this man to feel better, which conflicts with her sense of guilt. A description of her mindset while this relationship continues can be found in the second verse. “Vacant and free, yeah that is me, just tell me how and I’ll please you for free. Tell me I’m good, I know I’m bad, lies make me feel fine although I am sad.” Here she explains how she is emotionally vacant and, through this emotional vacancy, she feels no obligation to this man or any other. “Just tell me how and I’ll please you for free” suggests that she knows how to keep this mostly physical relationship continuing to her personal advantage, by offering up herself bodily to the man to avoid conversing about her obvious emotional emptiness towards the other half of the pairing. This song ends by fading out to the circus-type tune played in the intro.

“Happy Meal II” begins with a soft-toned synthesizer that introduces a space-like feeling as the melody soon follows, sung at a very low volume. “Arrange my books, in order, make up some nice stories to amuse you, make things look smart, and easy, shape up the place.” This line finishes just before the drums, guitar, and bass build up in unison during the pre-chorus: “Hungry for the meeting, the dinner we’ll be eating, wine that we’ll be drinking, and kinky thoughts I’m thinking, all because of you.” The lyrics thus far begin to suggest feelings of excitement again as she describes entertaining a new love interest with stories and shows thoughts of anticipating the next meeting. There is also a new found source of physical pleasure, increased here because it complements emotional connection. With this new potential love interest, she

describes her hoped-for interaction with the lyrics “the dinner we’ll be eating, wine that we’ll be drinking, and kinky thoughts I’m thinking, all because of you.” She explains in the chorus that this fling turned relationship has more value to her than prior pairings as she sings “and now I’ve found a partner, no one can be happier than I am, and now I’ve found a new friend, no one can be happier than me.” The music has a pleasantly slow tempo and grooves with grace as the instruments ring out at the end of the chorus before returning to the soft verses. The uplift musically in the pre-chorus brings delight, while the minors in the chorus give a further demonstration of the band’s talent. The minor notes played in the chorus also somehow bring out a cheery feeling as the melody is sung with a sort of conviction as she declares, “No one can be happier than me.” Her tone is best described as relaxed and happy, further explained in the second verse as she sings “prepare a meal, with candles, sweet wine and strings chosen for the purpose, then take a bath, with bubbles, shape up my face” which suggests that she is in a pleasant mindset and is proud of where she is.

“Never Recover” begins with a quick snare roll and the rest of the band erupts into a guitar-driven lick that continues for four phrases. The verse introduces a minor change as the drums continue with a rapid, jazz pattern. The lines “how I always memorize, every single misery, and I seem to glorify, everything inside of me” introduces a concept that is also simply explained in the title of the track: That she is continuing her misery as she reflects on her own past decisions. She also expresses her

self-awareness in the first verse as she admits to self-glorification. The pre-chorus follows the first verse nicely as acoustic guitars and drums fill the space with an assortment of hits on the toms. “And the hero never dies, if the lover hides between the sheets, there’s no escape cause you can’t sleep, and then you’ll see, you’re just like me” is sung over the pre-chorus as Persson sings, describing how she is thinking about her life in third person and begins to understand that her emotions stem from feelings felt by everyone, a sort of universal déjà vu, and feels trapped since she is unable to escape from her own thoughts.

The chorus bleeds out of the pre-chorus in major chords with glee with the lyrics “that’s what you called waste of time, I’ll be waiting down the line, that’s what you called waste of time, waiting for your valentine, that’s what you called waste of time, I know where your hero hides, that’s why you don’t sleep tonight, that’s what I call life” which describes how she is able to assess some of the things she said in her past and understands some of the hypocrisy that came with those statements. She also is able to step back and understand that she was at a different place in her life when she made those statements and dismisses her overly analytical self by re-enforcing that it is all a part of life. The song swings back into the verse with minor notes and a jumpy bass line and the second verse captures the overwhelming feeling of never escaping these feelings she continues to have by singing, “with a hero in the past, you hang on to history, such a loss will always last, and there’s no recovery” which may suggest that she is still holding on to a past lover for

some reason or another that is never fully explained. Perhaps she is referring to the love interest described in the song “Heartbreaker” but listeners are left guessing.

“Step on Me” begins with a driving bass line and drum pattern that abruptly stops as a ride, kick, snare pattern soothes the verse for the lyrics “Oh I think, you’re standing on my left foot, it’s hurting but that’s okay, cause I’m in your way, you break that foot that you’re standing on, I’ll walk on the other one,” which describes metaphorically that she is hurting on the inside, perhaps because she feels like she is holding back someone she cares about. She continues this self-sacrificing theme in a haunting voice, singing, “do what you want to do what you want to, be what you want to be what you want to, go on and step on me” and explains her willingness to be used to help this person she cares about. The tone of the song quickly changes by the second verse as the narrator realizes that the other person is not acknowledging her sacrifice by singing, “Oh, I think you’re spinning inside my head, I think of you all the day, cause you’re in my way, oh I think you’re holding the heart of mine, squeeze it apart that’s fine.” The last line of the verse expresses a blend of other- and self-directed *schadenfreude*.

“Love Fool,” which is the band’s hit single from the album, begins with quick hits on the high hat and a thumping kick drum that soon incorporates a snare hit to complete a dance style drum backing for the rest of the tune. The singer describes a haunting (co)dependence that reappears throughout the album as she sings, “Dear, I fear we’re facing a problem, you love me no

longer I know and, maybe there is nothing that I can do to make you do, mama tells me I shouldn’t bother, that I ought just to stick to another man, a man that surely deserves me, but I think you do.” The pre-chorus enters with a chromatic progression backed with “So I cry, I pray, and I beg” and the chorus lovingly enters with a strange, saddening, yet sarcastical happiness in the music. “Love me, love me, say that you love me, fool me fool me, go on and fool me, love me, love me, pretend that you love me, leave me, leave me, just say that you need me, so I cry and I beg for you to, love me, love me, say that you love me, leave me, leave me, just say that you need me, I can’t care about anything but you.” The song revolves around the chorus in which most of her true feelings are expressed while the second verse continues to explain her anxiety as her lover’s interest in her fades. “Lately I have desperately pondered, spent my nights awake and I wonder, what I could have done in another way to make you stay. Reason will not lead to solution, I will end up lost in confusion, I don’t care if you really care as long as you don’t go” describes her internal sadness and dependence on this now-fading relationship. The song ends smoothly with the words “I can’t care about anything but you.”

“Losers” begins with a simple high hat and ride hit pattern with synthesizers. “Look at all these losers, you find them everywhere, they’re fucked up and annoying, but you somehow seem to care, it’s easier to laugh, but something makes you stick around, you can’t watch from above, and keep your ten toes in the sand” begins the first verse describing a distaste for some people and yet

wrestling with the reality of having to interact socially. “Close your eyes, that’ll be the day you’ll find those lies, fold your ears, that’ll be the day that you will hear” are the lines from the chorus that explains how she is attempting to lift herself up from her state of depression and isolation.

“Iron Man” is an interesting track on this album as it is also a cover of Black Sabbath but is done in a jazzy style that masks the tune until the lyrics begin. A sweet, simple, clean guitar solo is placed nicely at the beginning of the song as the groovy bass line walks along the scale cleanly. The chorus has a nice Middle Eastern sensibility, as the drums syncopate with the guitars, other stringed instruments, and the synthesizer. The placement of this song is also strangely artistic as it is on the B side and could have been placed there because the lyrics describe revenge. The vengeance expressed in this song may have captured some of the narrator’s perspective of her failed love interests. She might possibly have placed this song at this point to communicate how her previous lovers felt towards her, an artistic master touch. Or, this song could be entirely fun for the artist and has little to no value to the album other than as an interesting cover.

“Great Divide” begins with yet another pleasant synth assortment as the lyrics ride over the simple, slow drum pattern “There’s a monster growing in our heads, raised up on the wicked things we’ve said, a great divide between us now, something we should know,” which expresses more guilt from the narrator about her previous words and actions as well as her personal distance from the new subject. “There’s something to

remember and something to forget, as long as we remember, there’s something to regret, something we should know” is sung softly, backed by dreamy music including violins. The song is short and dreamy, perhaps explaining some of the delusion and loss of reality that the artist feels after all she has experienced. “There’s a mountain higher than we know, its high but such a bitter view,” Persson sings as she describes both her successes and the bitterness she still feels.

The last track, “Choke,” possibly explains the regret that the artist feels along with the complicated experiences that were described in the earlier songs. By far, this song is the most interesting because it comes in with a nice rhythmic synth and drum combination. This song seems to tell more of the story for the whole album than any of the other songs for several reasons. “A common line, I closed my eyes, but couldn’t let it go, the perfect time, I dropped my guard, and lost but won somehow” is sung almost immediately after one phrase into the song. The lyrics suggest that, through her bout of emotional vacancy expressed earlier in the album, there was a critical moment in which she began to drop her guard for someone she admired and, although it did not work out with this person, she feels that she transitioned into a much better place emotionally from the experience. “It’s rather sad, it feels like we’ve never, made it together since” rings out gloriously in the chorus, hinting at the beautiful end to the album that is yet to come and explains how she was able to continue successfully on her own but is saddened by what might have been. “One word ahead, and you’d be dead,

I held you in my throat, I stumble by, attached to you, I couldn't let it go" is sung in the second verse and breathes the ever so refreshing insight into the whole story at the end of the album where she describes her inability to express her admiration for this person and could not shake the emotional connection. She is clearly reflecting on this experience at a pivotal moment for the album which also suggests that the person described in the lyrics might have been who the whole story of the album was truly about in the first place. One might even go as far as to suggest that this song was written before the others chronologically though there is no real way to know.

A beautiful musical break between the second and third chorus rises with full saxophones and trumpets while a jazz flute sings nicely atop a single note guitar riff. "It's rather sad, it's really sad, it's like we've never, made it together since, we'll never have the guts, to discover, we'll choke on it and die" ends the lyrical content of the album, fully explaining the points of her reflection, guilt, and confusion that continued throughout the album and, most importantly, explains the regret expressed rather suddenly in the song "Great Divide." The song, instead of fading out as probably expected with such an anthem, ends on an ascending musical progression and rings out to bring the album to its conclusion.

The music on this album performed by singer Nina Persson, guitarist Peter Svensson, bassist Mangus Sveningsson, drummer Bengt Lagerberg, and keyboardist Lars-Olof Johansson is extremely beautiful in both composition and performance on the album in the recording. The musical composition is intimately jazz-influenced at times and heavily influenced by classical, traditional pop music that was popularized in the early to late 1950s. The lyrical content and melody work done by Persson make this album the most interesting pop album in the last twenty years as it digs deep into complicated relationships, depression, stereotypical love, loss, psychological (mis)understanding, and, most importantly the chances left untaken and all the regret associated with it. This album challenges pop artistry with lyrical depth and musical understanding. This album is truly one of the most interesting albums that will ever exist in the pop genre and may very well be continually reviewed as a treasured piece in musical history.

Reference

The Cardigans. *First Band on the Moon*. 9 September 1996. Stockholm: Mercury Records, Produced by Tore Johansson