

9. Peter Murray, *Ants and Angels*

When Peter Murray's terrific, driving, bright-distorted-guitar, pop-rock song "Generation X DJ on E" cranks up, you immediately have two thoughts: (1) this is kind of 5 years ago, kind of Blink-182; and (2) but this is way better than Blink-182. Great lyrics, amazing, and yes, sophisticated pop melody. Hell, you'd have *liked* Blink-182 if they'd made music this good. Maybe if pop radio doesn't notice how smart the whole thing is, they'll play it, the same way they played Ben Folds's almost-as-good "Rockin' the Suburbs" a few years ago before they realized the joke was on them.

Then, when the also-catchy and slightly weird "Skydiver Friends" comes on, you think Murray isn't so much a smart Blink-182 but maybe a new Cake. Wry and ironic, a little too-obviously intelligent. Extremely talented, but it's starting to become obvious that Murray is so intent on not taking himself too seriously, that like the very good but always unsatisfying Cake, he's just not willing to say anything too pithy, lest ultra-hip 24-year-old pseudointellectuals and the second-rate critics they grow up to become accuse him of too much sentimentality.

Then the beautiful, haunting, and entirely serious yet not at all trite meditation on being alive, "Lucky to Breathe," comes on...and you realize you're absolutely wrong about Murray. It's too late to accuse him of being too serious, for you laughed your way through "Gen X DJ," and admired his wry smarts on "Skydiver Friends." By the end of the album, when Murray has morphed almost completely into Roland Orzabal, channeling the introspective spirit of the Tears for Fears singer, especially from his brilliant and ridiculously underrated master opus *Raoul and the Kings of Spain*, all you can do is sit back slack-jawed and hope against all hope that the world is ready for this kind of pop music again. If there is room in this world for another Roland, another Sting, another Peter Gabriel, another Simon and Garfunkel—in other words another artist entirely definitive of the Intelligent Pop genre, then world, meet Peter Murray.

If I may dwell a moment on TFF's Orzabal: TFF fans know that many of their albums contain a single very down-tempo song in which there is not much of a "pop groove" and possibly no drums at all, full of pregnant pauses, introspective themes, and yet still great melody. These songs might be thought of as experimental, except that Orzabal made them a staple of his style. Think "I Believe," from *Songs from the Big Chair*, "Famous Last Words" from *The Seeds of Love*, and, most relevant here, "I Choose You," from *Raoul*.

That's what Murray's "The Ark" is, and it's possibly as great as Orzabal's best work. The experimentation with an ultra-sophisticated Cello part, arranged and played by Kevin Fox, works brilliantly, and leaves you gasping for air. Wow.

But I've jumped to song 10. Along the way, you are entertained, moved, made to laugh, cry, and always sing along. "Murray vs. the Ants" is an ultra-catchy mid-tempo song that's hilarious for its amusing depiction of a paranoid Peter Murray losing his mind, waging a war against ants, but still tragic for its subject matter. The seriousness is all in the music, but sanity is precious, and Murray intends to say so in the most nuanced way. You will be singing the chorus to yourself for days.

That is, if you can get the beautiful melody of the verse of "Where do you go" out of your head. This sophisticated melody represents the kind of innovative pop composition that we're constantly urging songwriters to push themselves to achieve. It's sophisticated, entirely unexpected, and yet thematic: it's no less memorable for its winding path. Murray understands the meaning of a "melody's narrative arc." Mostly, his have strong, satisfying arcs. Like great stories, they have a beginning, a development, a conflict, a twist, and a resolution that's both less expected and makes more sense than the melody you *thought* you were going to hear. It's all accomplished in a 10- or 15-second passage. The list of songwriters who do this on a regular basis is very, very short.

Finally, Murray's lyrics are deeply thoughtful. Maybe too much so. They're fantastic, but not as effortless as they'll be in 10 years. Is this a criticism? Maybe, but it's like criticizing an artist for not having gotten where he's going yet. You have to enjoy genius *as it grows*. But if you're wondering whether the guy can use concrete images to say something about experience, read this: "Ears make wax, eyes make tears, drinking makes me older/Eyes make tears and I don't know why/Why do they have to make me cry?" In "Ears Make Wax" Murray seems to have found the perfect way to illustrate the realization that he is not in control of his emotions—the most basic realization of the human experience, perhaps, and one which most people fail to discover before they die.

Obviously from these comments, *Ants and Angels* is primed for a run at our top 3, and is the first record we've heard in a while that has a realistic chance to break the stranglehold on the top 3 that Inara George, Nick Alan, and Busbee have held.

But like those magical works, Murray's record is not flawless. Murray does not reach his standard of melodic inventiveness on every song, and on his way to becoming Roland Orzabal, he glances back at Blink-182 more times than you'd like. It's when channeling X-rock that he becomes his least interesting.

Murray, a perfectly good singer, is still not as amazing and dynamic vocalist as Orzabal, or say, Sting, is. Can he become one? Possibly. For now, his voice can verge on sounding a little ordinary, sometimes a little reminiscent of Todd Rundgren, his delivery style a little bland, as though he's not yet settled on how he likes to phrase things. As he releases future works, he'll have some discovery to do in this area.

Finally, given the utterly grandiose ambition of this album and its absolutely pristine recording quality, it's disappointing that Murray confines himself entirely to the most basic sounds of a small rock ensemble from songs 1 to 11. It's all guitar, drums, bass, and Fender Rhodes electric piano, and not much else. The couple of times he throws you a morsel of cello, you scarf it up and crave more symphonia (and more use of large acoustic spaces), but it's just not forthcoming, either in acoustic or electronic form. Damn. A number of the less pop-rocky songs could have been beautifully embellished with some kind of progressive orchestral drama, to great effect. If Murray felt a compulsion to "stay small," "stay intimate," or "stay raw" in deference to some kind of purist indie-rock aesthetic, then we'd say that is the wrong impulse for these heavyweight, downright important songs. "Gen X DJ" is a blast, but overall, Peter, you are no post-modernist. Let the strings play; just write something interesting for them to play, not something corny. (But you know that!)

Oh yeah, if you guessed Peter Murray was from Canada, you'd be correct. Once again, from north of the border comes a sophisticated gem. Totally inspiring.