

It's Wide Awake, It's Morning by Bright Eyes

Let's be honest. The opening minute or so of this album is pretty pretentious. It's one of those spoken introductions which I guess are supposed to sound off-the-cuff and ad-libbed. We hear Conor Oberst take a scripted sip from a glass of water, and then tell a story about a woman sitting on an aeroplane with a silent man; the plane crashes; the man speaks to the woman; and he sounds like a parent speaking to a small child – "We love you very, very, very, very, very much." And then the fun begins. Because for all the planned implied nostalgia of the opening, this is a really good album – acoustic, loud and varied. This is a folk record for the modern day. The first song, At the Bottom of Everything, introduces the listener to several of this album's trademarks and recurring themes. Bright Eyes have created a remarkably economical use of music. Whether in the ballads or the loud and angry numbers, there are never many instruments on display at one time, and the sound quality has a metallic, verging on tinny, edge to it. There is no fuzz or feedback, and the harmonies have oceans between them – the singers are literally octaves apart, and the fused wall of sound that close harmony bands generate is a world away. Oberst is economical with his sentiments too, as the opening track demonstrates. After all its build-up, with bats, belfries, guns and deep water, it ends with the most throwaway and Zen-like of declamations: "I'm happy just because I found out I'm really no one. At the Bottom of Everything also contains some incredibly rapid mandolin arpeggio picking – avoiding easy-way-out repeated notes, this is Nebraska's guitar picking speeded up a hundred-fold. Generally the album's instrumentation is constantly interesting – and if this sounds like faint praise, listen to the way the brass instruments come in at the expense of the conventional band rather than to supplement it. This is an acoustic album with a difference. And then there is Oberst's voice. He has been accused of shouting instead of singing during his live performances, and there is an element of this on this album. There is certainly little finesse to the way he gets his words out, and although on some occasions he does show his gentle side, there is just so much emotion that you get the feeling he has to semi-speak some of his lines, because these are merely words which he has to get across to you; the fact that they're part of a song is secondary. (For those of you who are by now fearing a vocal horror show – don't panic. Emmylou Harris is a prominent and sublime guest on the album. Her performance on We Are Nowhere and It's Now is reminiscent less of her recent duets with alt-country pin-up boys and more of her latter-day solo albums, and this record is all the better for it.) So what is his voice – however imperfect – actually saying? What is the message that is so important that he has to express it in such a raw and unharnessed manner? Again we need to be honest – this album is not about getting across a new message, some revolutionary comment. But that's okay; because what it does is communicate some classic political and cultural themes in an original manner. The gorgeous, gorgeous ballad (a duet with Emmylou Harris) Landlocked Blues delivers new ways of singing old laments: A good woman will pick you apart

A box full of suggestions for your possible heart

But you may be offended and you may be afraid

But don't walk away, don't walk away And the album's starting point, a reflection on the narrator's younger days, is re-employed to make poetical comment on the degeneracy of society: And there's kids playing guns in the street

And ones pointing his tree branch at me

So I put my hands up I say "enough is enough,

If you walk away, I'll walk away"

And he shot me dead Bright Eyes' fame was done no harm at all by their status as support act to Bruce Springsteen and REM during last year's anti-Bush Vote for Change tour. But it would be a brave soul who denied that the tour was a home from home for the band. The album's closing number, Road to Joy, again displays a refreshing originality in the way it lambasts the current US administration. It may take a couple of listens to reassure you that the song, at the point it really gets going, is an ironic take on what seems to be the attitude of Bush and company: So when you're asked to fight a war that's over nothing

It's best to join the side that's gonna win

And no one's sure how all of this got started

But we're gonna make them goddam certain how its gonna end

Oh ya we will, oh ya we will! After that, there is little more to say, and Conor Oberst is consistent to the end – a swift moment of

self-deprecation as he makes fun of his own voice, another brief and concentrated burst of rage, and then a sudden (not violent, just abrupt)

conclusion. That's all, folks. No time for time-wasting – he got all that out of his system in the first minute of the album. The rest of it is purely and concisely crafted, and the result is the real deal.

About the Author