

ELVIS PERKINS IN DEARLAND

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In a traditional New Orleans funeral procession, “the second line” refers to the lively troupe of brass musicians who trail behind the mourners, injecting a spirit of spontaneous celebration into an otherwise somber affair. Indeed, Elvis Perkins in Dearland’s new eponymous album feels very much like the second line to his exquisitely melancholic and much-hailed solo debut *Ash Wednesday*. *Ash Wednesday* gained Elvis a dedicated and reverent following for its nuanced meditations on death and grief—many moments on that first record felt as if the listener had tip-toed into the intimate confines of a private elegy, enveloped in that wondrous, old-soul quality of Elvis’s voice.

There are still plenty of private moments on *Elvis Perkins in Dearland*, but Elvis is now joined by a talented trio of friends that toured with him in support of *Ash Wednesday*. Along with Elvis on guitar and lead vocals, *Elvis Perkins in Dearland* is Brigham Brough (upright bass, saxophone, vocals), Wyndham Boylan-Garnett (pump organ, guitar, harmonium, trombone, vocals), and Nick Kinsey (drums, percussion, banjo, clarinet, vocals). Many of the new songs on *Elvis Perkins in Dearland* were honed on the road by the four bandmates, whose natural ease with one another allowed them to constantly experiment with arrangements on the fly.

“On this new record we wanted to capture the spirit of our performances,” drummer Nick Kinsey said. “The challenge was to get down that spontaneity.” To witness an *Elvis Perkins in Dearland* performance is to witness a happening—the band has gained a reputation for stunning live shows that are both intimate and energetic. Moments of intense beauty, in which the room falls under the trance of Elvis’s magnetic presence, can easily flow into joyous, foot-stomping numbers that bring down the house.

“This album is faster and younger than *Ash Wednesday*,” Elvis admits with a wry smile. “Being in a studio with three other creatives instead of just one was a new thing for me. It takes four times as long to decide everything... but in the end, this kind of interplay made for much good.” Listening to *Elvis Perkins in Dearland*, one can hear the palpable joy of the lone singer-songwriter meeting up with his band mates after a long, solitary journey. At the beginning of the album’s opening track “Shampoo,” Elvis knocks out a catchy, loping riff on his acoustic guitar even as he is being surrounded by a collective chorus of whistles, tempting him to come join the circle. And join it he does—with the first seductive thrush and pull of Wyndham’s B3 organ, the song eases into its catchy hitch-step rhythm and Elvis’s lonesome call “sweep up, little sweeper boy” is folded into the textured fullness of the *Dearland* sound.

Grammy Award-winning producer Chris Shaw (Public Enemy, Bob Dylan, Ween) helped to mastermind this sound by balancing the vast array of eclectic instruments that the band utilizes—from the quiet heave of a harmonium or hurried whisper of strings lilting in and out of Elvis’s voice on “Hour’s Last Stand” to the pounding, ring-tailed beat of the marching drum that propels “Hey” skywards. “Hey,” one of the album’s catchiest numbers, perfectly balances its propulsive rhythm with delicate vocal harmonies supplied by Lavender Diamond front-woman Becky Stark.

Even while creating its own particular sound, the band is clearly influenced by a range of American roots music, as evidenced by the roughened harmonica licks punctuating Elvis’s verses, the wicked, bluesy squeal of the organ on “I’ll Be Arriving,” or the mournful tromp of the tuba on “Chains, Chains, Chains” (played by the estimable Howard Johnson, who has recorded with John Lennon and the Band). In fact, it is in this juxtaposition of old and new where the feeling of a “happening” emerges, where we feel the spontaneous gathering of melodies.

But the album truly succeeds by marrying this rich amalgam of early rock n roll, folk, and gospel with the tender intimacy of Elvis’s voice. On “123 Goodbye,” another song that toes the razor’s edge between the poignant and the jubilant, Elvis conjures the conflicting moods of the sad observer at a celebration:

*Once upon a time
we were happy in the bathtub in the abacus of the rains
once upon a time
we take our laughter to the blackboard
with a calculus of pain.*

There is a moment right in the middle of ‘Send My Fond Regards to Lonelyville,’ when Elvis muses to himself “this is how they come to leave their lonelinesses, weeks will pass in a tennis match before she for him undresses,” invoking some of the dreamlike folksiness that permeated *Ash Wednesday*. Then, all of a sudden, the music parts and an entire brass band comes wandering through the song. One can almost picture Elvis and his guitar stepping lightly out of the way to let the troupe pass, greeting them with one of those wry smiles. It is a moment that succinctly captures the “happening” of this record—you can taste the sweat of the stage, feel the tuba’s pulse in your knees, hear Elvis’s quiet breath in your ear. At once raucous and profound, *Elvis Perkins in Dearland* conjures both the greatest celebration and the saddest funeral, channeling an ageless wisdom that deepens with each new listen.