

The Vinyl Phyle

Shelleyan Orphan
Century Flower
Columbia / Rough Trade

Shelleyan Orphan are a British duet with a twist. All the songs on *Century Flower* are written and arranged by Caroline Crawley and Jemaur Tayle. But here's the twist: the arrangements on this album are composed using over eleven instruments, most of them being classical. The result is an astonishing, full-sounding album with very few weak spots.

The arrangements on *Century Flower* are quite complex. However, they are so well done that the result is entirely pleasurable. Mostly, the songs are soft and subtle, but they still maintain an intense gripping power. The vocalists, one male and the other female, weave their voices around each other in such a way as to completely wrap up the listener.

Crawley's vocals are especially captivating. Her voice is soft and smooth, while maintaining an urgent and somewhat desperate quality behind them. Between bits of lyric, the listener can hear her take quick, sigh-like breaths, as if the song is clinging to the end of her tongue, not wanting to fall off harshly, but rather at the right time and with importance.

The arrangements are also a real joy to listen to. Most of the songs you can just immerse yourself in. Many instruments are showcased and given their chance to shine. Cellos come through with real drama, as well

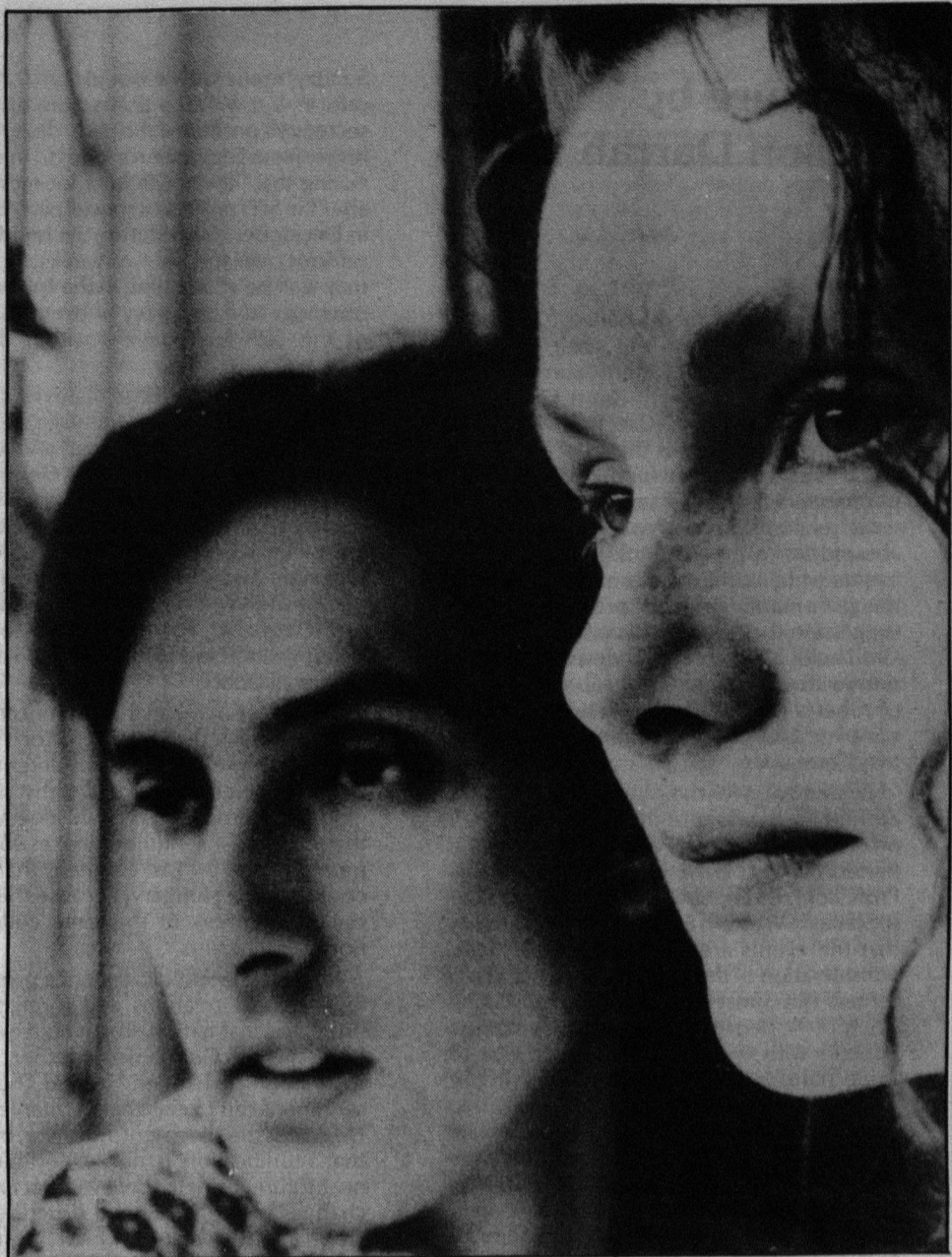
as double bass, piano, flute, violin, saxophone, viola, oboe, cello, accordion, and french horn. Each instrument compliments the other when used together, and each shines when used alone.

This variety of instrumentation is used to accentuate the basic pop formula of drums and guitar, but even this mix is done well. The first two tracks on the album, "Shatter" and "Time Blind," are excellent examples of this. For instance, "Time Blind" begins with distorted, electronic guitar in an otherwise empty soundscape. As each accompanying instrument is added, the song acquires more layers and additional texture. The result is breathtaking.

The music is not the only intense and contemplative part of this album. There is also something very real and thoughtful about the lyrics. "The Silent Day" tells the story of a mourner being unable to cry for a lost loved one as Crawley sings "I remember you / I wish I could cry but nothing comes." And there is something subtly positive about lines like "building blow by blow" and "this is not love this is life."

My only criticism of this album is that, on the whole, it does not live up to the dramatic potential exhibited in the first two songs. But that would be quite a high level of intensity for Shelleyan Orphan to maintain, and perhaps unfair to ask of them. The other eight songs, with maybe one or two exceptions, are quite good songs in their own right. *Century Flower* moves you while keeping you in its grip.

—Ron Kuipers



James

James McMurtry
Too Long in the Wasteland
Columbia

*there's a ghost of a moon in the afternoon
bullet holes in the mailbox
bullet holes in the mailbox
key holes in my mind
too long in the wasteland
too long in the wasteland
and falling behind*
—from "Too Long in the Wasteland"

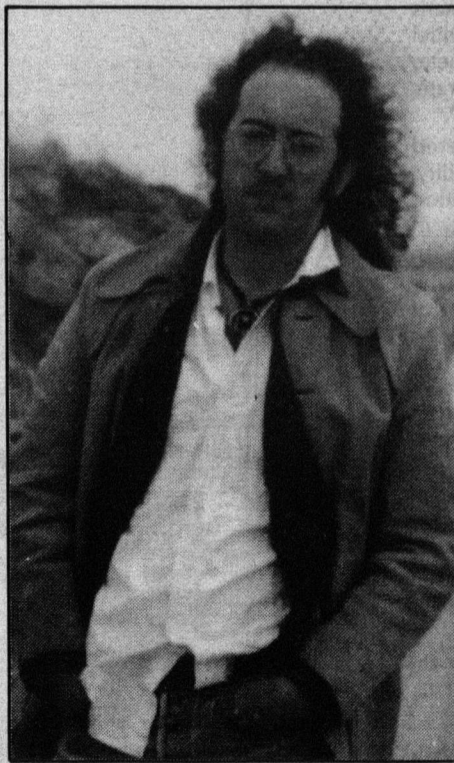
McMurtry

I don't know what morbid fascination the heartland of America holds for singer/songwriters, but their odes to Midwestern motels and big Detroit steel are a continued blessing to thoughtful listeners. The big names in this genre are John Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen, whose *Nebraska* evokes the haunting echoes of prairie and highway which typify this music at its best.

Mellencamp produced *Wasteland*, and did a fine job of building acoustic guitar/vocal harmonies. Many songs also feature a driving bass/drum rhythm section, and there is some fine, understated keyboard and guitar work. The rockers are reminiscent of Mellencamp's "Pink Houses," while "Evangeline" evokes the great country songwriters like Guy Clark and John Prine. Over that layered, textured sound, McMurtry adds a quavering, bittersweet voice, typical of his peers.

However, the strength of this album, like *Nebraska* and *Uh Huh* before it, is its lyrical content. Actually, the roots of this music grow back to Woody Guthrie's dust bowl songs. It is hard to pick out couplets, both because there are so many excellent examples, and because, unlike most contemporary songwriters, McMurtry weaves together complex narratives that span entire songs. This is a brilliant, poetic album.

Steinbeck wrote about the displaced, the Joads and their kind, who have moved west since America was first settled, looking for something they could not identify. James McMurtry is their descendant.



Too Long

*I'm not from here
but people tell me
it's not like it used to be
they say I should've been here
back about ten years
before it got ruined by folks like me
we can't help it
we just keep moving
it's been that way since long ago
since the iron age, chasing the great herds
we mostly go where we have to go*
—from "I'm Not From Here"

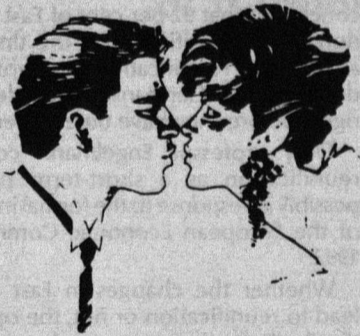
—Randal Smathers

in the
Wasteland

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