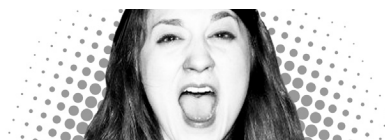




The Spin Cycle



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Bat for Lashes
Two Suns
(Astralwerks)

On this album, her second under the Bat for Lashes moniker, Natasha Khan weaves an enchanted dreamscape of dark imaginings and fairytale whimsy redolent with images of longing, loss, anticipation and deepest desire. While fans of Tori Amos and Björk will surely appreciate her shimmering aesthetic, Khan's closest musical kin is perhaps the 80s wunderkind Kate Bush. If you need a dose of dramatic eccentricity sung in an otherworldly voice, look no further than *Two Suns*.

Ostensibly a concept album about Khan's alter ego Pearl, the album presents itself as a journey of metaphysical self-discovery. That topic seems a bit heavy for an 11-song album, and at times, the themes don't seem to add up to anything beyond self-indulgent wandering; however, in terms of sheer musicality,

this may be one of the best albums of 2009 thus far.

Layered with sparkling vocals and musky instrumentation, Khan's delicate, dusky songs wind around and

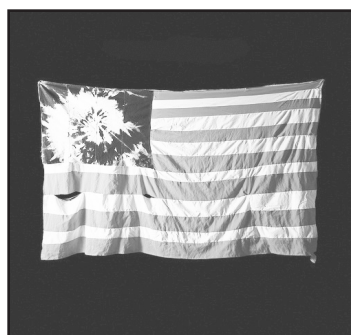
rating
8.4

trip over each other, each song more complex than the next. She manages to create something at once mysterious and accessible, gloomy and hopeful — oftentimes in the same song.

The strength of Khan's songwriting is paralleled by her incredible voice. Located somewhere in the space

between the aforementioned Björk and Kate Bush, with hints of Vashti Bunyan and new-age goddess-inspired vocals, her voice hits even the highest notes with a hint of dustiness. Heavy with echoes and sighs, her voice only enhances the ethereal feel of the album. The strongest moments of the album emerge when Khan allows her voice to take center stage, not letting her need for glittery studio tricks overpower it.

Khan's storytelling ability kept me rapt from the first few words of the glorious "Glass" right through the haunting masterpiece "The Big Sleep." All in all, this dreamscape is one to which I'll return whenever I need the pure fantasy of the Brothers Grimm (rather than the saccharine Disney variety).



Akron/Family
Set 'Em Wild, Set 'Em Free
(Dead Oceans)

On Akron/Family's latest release (and their first for the Austin-based Dead Oceans label), the band goes back and forth between its two main musical personae: jolly psychedelic folk-rockers and cacophonous jam-based noisemakers. While that divide has worked well in past albums, in *Set 'Em Wild, Set 'Em Free*, it tends to interrupt the flow of the album by taking the listener from one extreme to the next with no real sense of order or purpose. Perhaps that's part of the charm, though: Akron/Family revels in shaking up expectations, in taking its listeners through as many tempo-changes, key-shifts, and yelping melodies in one song as some bands do over the course of an entire album.

The whole album plays as a campfire sing-along orchestrated by (increasingly drunk) friends. Starting off, the melodies and harmonies are tight, and the percussion flawless. As it progresses, though, things fall apart: the songs become longer and more spastic, and dissonance

creeps in. The delicate beauty of the opening songs is overshadowed by the raucous shouting and almost prog-rock posturing of the middle section. At the end, they return to form, giving more of the simple, earnest tunes at which they excel.

rating
6.9

The earthy, sincere songs tend to be the best moments on the album. The playful back-and-forth vocals on "River" rise into an anthem about the beauty of nature, and form the best five minutes of the entire set. While Akron/Family could easily become caricatures of their neo-hippie selves, songs like that redeem them.

This collection of songs does not truly

shine in its recorded version — the best way to hear them is live. The mischievous nature of the band can only be fully captured in the romping lightheartedness of its live shows. Recording the songs takes out the experiential element and, however much they try, Akron/Family simply cannot recreate a rambling sing-along in a flat recording studio.

While I sometimes question their choices (was it really necessary to end a nearly six-minute-long song with an improvised version of "Auld Lang Syne"? Really?), Akron/Family never bores me. The constant battle between noise and melody makes for an interesting though certainly not coherent listen. *Set 'Em Wild, Set 'Em Free* is not Akron/Family's best album, but I'd gladly take it over most other bearded-hippie-folk-rocker creations any day. ■

Kaitlin Butler knows more adjectives than anybody you've ever met, unless you've met Kaitlin Butler.
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