

Swimming downstream

From collaborations to acoustic venues, Great Lake Swimmers go with the flow

Great Lake Swimmers

With Amy Seeley and Mark Davis
Thursday, 29 March at 8pm
Starlite Room

LIZ DURDEN
Arts & Entertainment Staff

Read any of the Great Lake Swimmers' reviews and you'll find their music described as "hauntingly beautiful" and "a combination of indie folk, roots music and alt-country pop," as well as comparisons to the band Iron and Wine and the inevitable talk of vocalist Tony Dekker's similarity to Neil Young.

While all of these references may be useful in describing the band's third album, *Ongiara*, it's important to note that the group's sound goes beyond these simple clichés.

According to Dekker, the new album is a bit different from their previous two, not so much in the sound generated, but in the process through which it was created. Dekker comments that it was an interesting experience to work with other artists; until now, Great Lake Swimmers have never really collaborated with other musicians.

"It is kind of new territory for me to invite new people to put their touch on some of the songs," Dekker says, adding that it was an opportunity to work with some talented musicians.

"It was absolutely an amazing experience on a personal level for me to be able to work with these folks—particularly being able to sing with someone like Serena Ryder. She's an amazing vocalist, and you know, working with [Blue Rodeo's] Bob Deegan was really a high point for me. Being able to watch him work was really amazing."

Other artists that collaborated on the disc were Owen Pallett, Sarah Harmer, Mike Overton, Darcy Yates, Mike Olsen and Mike Bonnell.

Themes found on the disc include an exploration of the wilderness, of self-realization and the random ways in which individual lives can overlap. Lyrics like "Floating over your rocky spine / The glaciers made you and now you're mine" and "There's a mark on my hand, put there by the land" demonstrate the impact we have on our country and the impact our geography has on us.

"Themes of the rural natural landscapes and the different ways it all overlaps with the mental or the emotional landscape, so to speak—things overlapping has always been something I've been interested in exploring as a song writer," Dekker professes. "I try to filter through my experiences or filter in the things I come into contact with and try to distill it into



song form. [Inspiration comes from] personal experiences and good stories. Extremes of emotion are kind of important to me—I'm really drawn to that as a writer. Definitely on this new record there are a lot of themes of the environment."

"The acoustics play a big part in the recording process. Trying to get the natural reverb of some of the places we have recorded in [has] become an important thing for me."

TONY DEKKER

As can be noted on earlier albums that were recorded in an abandoned silo and a church, the acoustics of the

location were important to Great Lake Swimmers in recording *Ongiara*.

"The acoustics play a big part in the recording process. Trying to get the natural reverb of some of the places we have recorded in [has] become an important thing for me," Dekker says. "There's some research involved; I've gone to scout out places and really think of what would make for an interesting acoustic sound."

The new album was recorded in Aeolian hall, a historic building in Toronto, which was chosen for its acoustic quality. From Dekker's perspective it provided the sort of feel he was looking for on *Ongiara*—the airy, atmospheric ambience that is the Great Lake Swimmers' signature, but this time around, with a heightened sense of nostalgia.

"It's a building that's a couple hundred years old and it's had a lot of different uses over the years," Dekker explains. "It's just a beautiful sounding room; [that was the main reason] for wanting to record there."

"Stop, listen, feel."

These lyrics, found in the song "There Is A Light," encompass the intent of the Great Lake Swimmers' latest album. It seems as though under the intricacy of the music, all they want is for you to listen and take note of your emotions.

Upon first listening to *Ongiara*, one might miss the complexity of the Great Lake Swimmers' music. With their simple narrative-lyrical style and gentle riffs, it's easy to let it wash over you. After further inspection, though, the beautiful layering of instruments such as banjo, guitar, percussion and violin begin to soak through.

But the depth doesn't end with

instrumentation. As one deciphers the lyrics, they move beyond simply telling a story; they're often allegorical and have emotional undertones. The album touches on themes of departure and return, the overlap of the natural and emotional landscapes, and the progression of life's lessons.

The album gives you the feeling of lying in the grass staring up at the stars on a hot summer night. At the same time, it makes you wish for a rainy day so you could curl up with a mug of tea and stare out the window at the dreary world. Either way, it's safe to say that *Ongiara* is a beautifully crafted set of songs that will appeal to nearly every listener.



Great Lake Swimmers

Ongiara
Nettwerk
www.greatlakeswimmers.com

LIZ DURDEN
Arts & Entertainment Writer

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