

Whenever a band disappears for a long time, it has fairly good odds of breaking its sound instead of making it again. The new album can be brilliant beyond most people's short-remembered expectations or an insult to accomplishments of the past.

After a three-year hiatus, the last thing 10,000 Maniacs wanted to do was insult their audience. So they stayed brilliant.

Our Time in Eden, the first effort from the Jamestown, N.Y., folk-rock band since 1989's *Blind Man's Zoo*, continues its string of touching, powerful songwriting. And like a fine wine, the band has matured, adding a natural fluidity to its sound with songs centered more on group jams than pieces written in isolation and assembled in the studio.

The band's lead vocalist Natalie Merchant doesn't see anything so odd about the band's prolonged absence. If anything, she says, it may be the best thing the group's ever done.

"We took some time off because people wanted to organize their lives; we'd been on tour for years," she says. "It was like a time of reflection and rest."

In that time, other band members got married, and one had a child. Writing the new material took a year, Merchant says. Recording took a month.

"I think we all grew to appreciate what we do for a living," Merchant says. "When we were so involved with touring, I think we all lost sight of how enjoyable it was to be a musician. And there's better communication between the people in the group. It's like a short separation is healthy for a friendship or working relationship—that's why people take vacations, isn't it?"

Whatever may have happened since the band's last tour, it worked. *Our Time in Eden* calls to mind much of the Maniacs' earlier work without sounding redundant.

From haunting shades of their early new-wavy songs to Motown beats and James Brown horns, the Maniacs



10,000 maniacs

After a three-year hiatus, Natalie and crew have found their place in Eden.

By KEN HUNT, *The Daily*, U. OF WASHINGTON

stretch their already wide musical tent.

And while the band has brought other instrumentalists into the studio before, it's never been to this extent or effect. Bassoon duets, percolating percussion and ever-present strings lend depth and maturity not yet seen from the band.

Paul Fox's production of *Our Time In Eden* also marks a break with Peter Asher, who is largely responsible for firming up the band's sound with *In My Tribe* and *Blind Man's Zoo*. The abusive but effective Asher so fully realized the Maniacs' potential that to many it seemed odd to leave him behind. But they did, and it worked.

"Because the members of the group haven't changed, it seemed like maybe bringing in a fresh pair of ears and a new influence of some sort would be good," Merchant says. "It was good to work with someone who grew up listening to the same music we did. Paul's a musician in his own right—a jazz piano player—so he was really good at arranging songs."

But *Our Time in Eden* truly distinguishes itself in

every room," she sings, nearly crying.

Merchant says she took this approach after revisiting old albums by Van Morrison and Bob Dylan, who she realized "could handle the personal and the political on a record and the shift wouldn't be jarring at all. I thought I had been doing that, too, but maybe I was avoiding being too personal—I thought it was self-indulgent and no one was really interested. I realized I was really moved by that sort of content in other writers' works, so maybe I should try it myself and not be embarrassed."

But, she says, "It's not about me anyway." (This means R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe—Merchant's semi-significant other—can breathe a sigh of relief.)

"I've always used first person before; I'm not a single mother or a factory worker, but I've written songs from the perspectives of these characters ['Eat for Two' and 'Maddox Table']. And I've never been married."

Except to the 10,000 Maniacs. And now, after what appears to be a healthy separation and renewed energy, the band's ready to give it another shot. ■

Merchant's approach to lyric writing. In the past, she has written in third person, made political declarations or presented an "I" as a distinctly separate character. The new songs have more of an introspective feel, a sense of continuity between the artist and the product.

"That was an interesting experiment for me because I think it showed a bit of confidence and maybe maturity at the same time since I wasn't afraid to use myself as subject matter," Merchant says. "In the past I felt like I kind of disguised myself in other characters, or I would make a composite personality. Some of that exists on this record, but I think it's a very honest record and a bit more personal."

The effect is most striking in "Jezebel," a heartbreaking tale of disintegrating love. While very much in the spirit of "Verdi Cries" and "Jubilee" from the past two albums, Merchant does not distance herself with this one. "You lie there, an innocent baby. I feel like the thief who is raiding your home, entering and breaking and taking in