

REVIEWS

THE NEW YEAR EP Dear Nora • Magic Marker

If you expected Dear Nora's follow-up to 2001's spectacular debut *We'll Have a Time* to be filled with the same whirlwind of yummy pop goodness that made the first record such a success, you're in for a bit of a surprise.

For one, *The New Year EP* is really more of a solo project by queer cutie Katy Davidson. The band's front-woman, who, in the name of love, packed up and moved to San Francisco a couple of years back, recorded the EP without fellow Portland bandmates Ryan Wise and Marianna Ritchey. The result is a quiet album, reminiscent of a gray and rainy Portland morning. Sometimes dreary, sometimes calming, reflective and generally moody.

Perhaps characteristic of Davidson's own style, the most noticeable change in sound is more instrumentals and experimentation. Showing off her talent for the piano, she's crafted three soft and dreamlike "codas," or instrumental pieces, to go along with pre-existing Dear Nora songs "The New Year," "Dreaming Out Loud" and "A Lullaby," giving them a slower and more nostalgic feel.

This isn't to say, though, that Dear Nora doesn't deliver. Once again, Davidson offers up the same simple yet thoughtful lyrical brilliance that made the first album so charming. And while the songs may seem a little more melancholy as she contemplates both changes in seasons and changes in life, the harmonies are still catchy and poppy enough to find yourself bumping along to.

If you're a fan who was a-wishin' and a-hopin' for more of that first sound, you may be a little disappointed. But if you're devoted enough to explore with them, Dear Nora may just win your heart one more time.

—Courtney Perkins

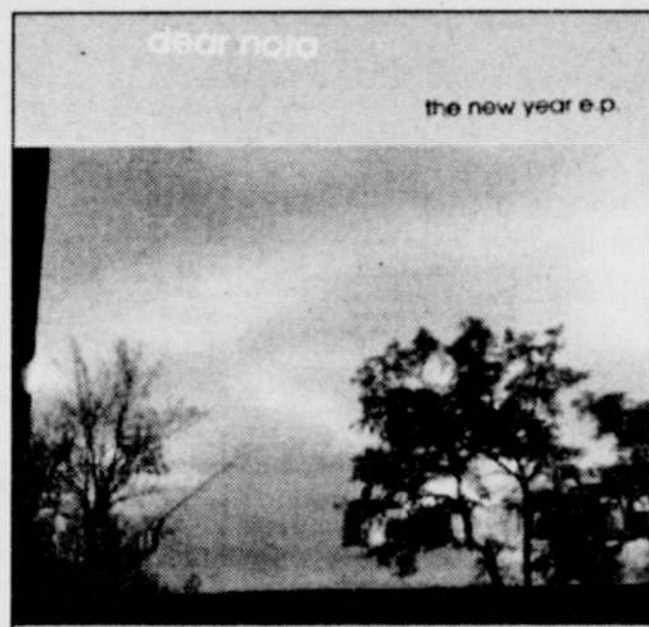
BETTER DAYS Lijoi • Hamlet Recordings

Ernest Lijoi takes full control on his third full-length album, *Better Days*.

Having reworked the Sondheim-influenced, thematic production of tracks like the dusty disc opener "Holding On," he is poised for stardom.

With a country-tinged immediacy and romanticism, the lyrics swirl through the psyche. Transplanting himself from New England to New York City, the singer/songwriter has upgraded production values, garnering critical attention and moving his show "uptown."

It's obvious that touring his cabaret show *Being Ernest* has had purposeful impact on the overall picture here. There are several interesting inferences from diverse genres: swing, jazz and plain ol' pop—a bit Counting Crows here, a tinge of Hedwig there. This clearly is heard in the upbeat "Dancing in



the Rain" when Lijoi sings, "I stopped by for coffee, but she poured me some champagne, then she took me dancing in the rain."

Breakout track "Dance with the Devil" has matter-of-fact sexual innuendo-encrusted throughout, "setting the floor on fire" and finding common ground with latter-day Brian Setzer's neo-rockabilly.

Better Days includes its fair share of grounded, slower-moving tracks, but Lijoi is at his best when he belts and boogies. Certainly the (cocktail) club favorite here would be "The Only One," a quirky parody professing undying love while seeking self-adulation.

These are indeed better days for Lijoi, whose lyrical content is brilliantly marked by storytelling, as heard in the disc closer, "Alibi," where "I'll be your diversion and you can be my alibi" has quite a real, honest ring to it. There is an importance in being Ernest. Join the club at www.lijoi.com.

—TJ Norris

ATMOSPHERE The Quails • Inconvenient Recordings

Two girls, one guy. Part pop, part politics. Saturated and overdriven fuzzy guitars.

Screeching vocals reminiscent of Sleater-Kinney. Righteous, purposeful lyrics. It's the raging San Francisco trio The Quails—hold onto your hats.

If you've ever heard the soundtrack to the documentary *Athens, Ga: Inside/Out*, you may recall the lo-fi art-rock sound that was pouring out of that sleepy Southern town in the early to mid-1980s. Listening to The Quails makes you feel as if you're back in time, lurking in Olympia or Athens, obsessively collecting every Pylon single or every title from the Kill Rock Stars label.

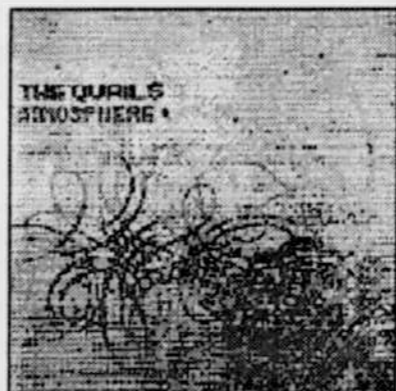
But no, it's 2003—and The Quails are on a mission, trends be damned.

Their second release, *Atmosphere*, is a raw explosion—13 tracks expressed sparingly and with little deviation. Yeah, their sonic palette is bland; most tracks are more alike than divergent. There are a few exceptions: Track 8 resembles Throwing Muses circa *Real Ramona*, and Track 9 throws in some atonal keyboard weirdness to shake things up.

The beauty of this trio is that they choose minimalism and sing their guts out. And for the most part it works. In our crazed world of overconsumption, where the virus of gluttony and excess makes no exception for art + music, The Quails' gloriously simple approach is subversive.

Your best bet? Take these guys at face value. They're blasting a message of empowerment and justice with a punk-rock megaphone. Now all we have to do is open our minds, stand up and heed the call.

—Cori Taratoot



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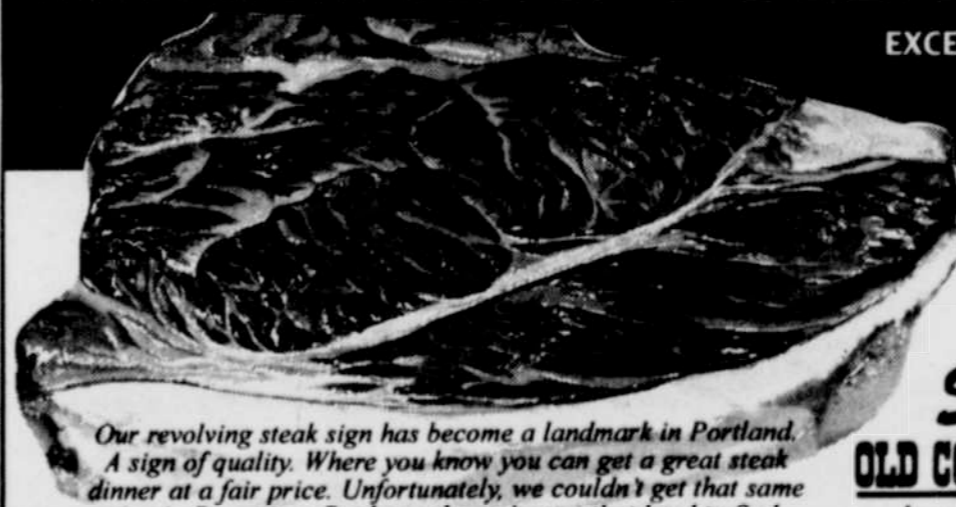
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