

# Cracking the Books

Enlightening the Masses

It's unfair to pigeonhole The Books with any of the newly-christened genre names that seem to bubble up in hipster-friendly music publications on a weekly basis. Folktronica, the term most often used to elucidate The Books' sound, really only grazes the surface and belies the complexity behind their music. Wikipedia cites bands like Boards of Canada, Four Tet and Mum (bands with sometimes similar but mostly divergent sounds) as examples of folktronica musicians.

But unfortunately, it manages to get even more convoluted than that. According to Wikipedia, folktronica somehow bleeds into similar styles like "laptop folk" (which I've never heard of, but I'm sure has probably been used incessantly on Pitchforkmedia.com), "beardtronica" (which I believe was contrived by a smart-ass Wikipedian to solely confuse), and "nu-folk" (which also has been used on Pitchfork and supposedly comprises the likes of Devendra Banhart!!!). From the sarcasm, I hope you can sense, folktronica, The Books really are not. Their music and their technique are much too intricate and subtle. Now, what they are...

First, The Books are a duo composed of Nick Zamutto and Paul de Jong, two found sound archivists/musicians with a shared passion for awkward moments caught on tape, the pure tonality of the human voice and the obscure scat singer Shooby Taylor. As a team they combine original cello, guitar and altered vocal work with samples of pre-recorded human conversation, pre-speech and idiosyncratic vocalization, advertisements and dialogue from film. With these found sound samples sometimes taking center stage in a song, as they are repeated, stretched, stuttered and altered in numerous other ways, they sometimes dictate rhythm and subsequently extend a song beyond traditional structure.

Recontextualized rather than mutilated, these samples take on lives of their own, reaching for new messages and sound apart from their original environment. But through their original instrumentation, The Books still operate within some familiar framework of melody. Over the course of three albums (*Thought for Food*, *The Lemon of Pink* and *Lost and Safe*), they have gained a significant cult following.

For rare insight into their attitudes



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towards found sound, seek out the Internet radio broadcast that de Jong and Zamutto did last year for www.dublab.com, which is now available through Dublab as a podcast. The hour-long broadcast features favorite songs and melodies (both from other artists and The Books catalog) as well as snippets from The Books' library of found sound and field recordings.

What begins with a zealous preacher trying to sell God morphs haphazardly but somehow logically into Laurie Anderson's "O Superman," the idiosyncratic scating of Shooby Taylor, "Take Time" from *The Lemon of Pink*, "Contempt" from *Thought for Food* and a slew of obscure found sound and old timey and international folk music. All of it in some way contributes to an understanding of the intention behind the band's original albums.

Their live shows now include pre-recorded video accompaniment created by The Books themselves. This new visual element compiles numerous snippets of found video culled from thrift stores and field recordings, much in the same way the duo collects their sound samples. The overall performance, visual and aural, should entertain as well as challenge. If it were simple, and I were lazy, it'd be nothing more than folktronica. **EW**



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