

The Decemberists, Revamped

Yes, that's electric guitar you're hearing

There was a period, from 2005 until last year, when the Decemberists seemed to be stuck in a major rut. After the worst song on 2005's *Picaresque* somehow earned the band some radio play, the band's popularity skyrocketed even as the music the Decemberists put out got worse. In spite of an interesting new penchant for thematic albums like *The Crane Wife*, the sound of the music itself stagnated. Longtime fans who'd been around since *5 Songs* and what

continues to be the band's best record, debut album *Castaways & Cutouts*, started to lose interest.

But this year's release, *The Hazards of Love*, breaks that vicious cycle. It's a narrative album somewhat like its predecessor *The Crane Wife*, which consists of two narratives — one of which was inspired by a Japanese folk tale, the other by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *The Hazards of Love* continues with that trend, except that unlike *The Crane*



The Decemberists, Other Lives
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Wife's two sonic novellas (not to mention the short story songs that comprise the Decemberists' previous work), this album contains one unified narrative that's meant to be enjoyed from start to finish. Born of Colin Meloy's obsession with British folk music, the record's tale of star-crossed lovers breaks with the Decemberists' previous records in the heavy urgency of the strings and a pounding rhythm section the likes of which we've never seen from this band. There's even howling electric guitar. The Decemberists? Electric guitar? It's true. Though Colin Meloy's quivering, nasal vocals are unmistakably his own, and songs like "The Hazards of Love 2 (Wager All)" are reminiscent of the band's best early work, the album proves that the Decemberists aren't just a kitschy one-trick pony.

Becky Stark, vocalist for Lavender Diamond, plays the album's female protagonist, Margaret, and though her shrill voice is definitely an acquired taste, its soprano trill is perfectly suited for the English maiden she portrays on this record. You can imagine her singing madrigals in high school choir. It's a nice complement to Meloy's voice, which has always lent itself well to the old-timey historical ballads he composes. Judicious use of harpsichord completes the olde English effect. On this tour, the Decemberists will play *The Hazards of Love* in its entirety, which is the way the album is meant to be enjoyed. The second half of the show will consist of older material, which should please not only the new fans but all the old fans who've returned to the band's bosom after a period of indifference. **EW**

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