

# Deconstructing Pop

Yo La Tengo is genius + love

**B**reak-up songs with gorgeous atmospherics. Breezy, wistful pop songs played alongside waves of distortion. Plucky piano and drifts of dreamlike noise. Dusky harmonies. Welcome to Yo La Tengo, the quintessential indie rock band that, somewhat quietly, has been making music for the past 25 years, with more talent between the members than any three people have a right to.

The home ground of Yo La Tengo — Hoboken, New Jersey — inspired husband-and-wife duo Ira Kaplan (guitars, piano, vocals) and Georgia Hubley (drums, piano, vocals), who found each other in the early '80s through a mutual love of record stores and the New York Mets. After some initial shake-ups with personnel, bassist and vocalist James McNew (he's from Brooklyn) joined 19 years ago. *Popular Songs*, their 12th album, came out in 2009, and plays like a mix tape that your cool older cousin would make, full of songs that take familiar sounds and do something unexpected with them.

Rather than surprising fans with mediocre output, the only surprise is that each YLT album is consistently good. To hear McNew tell it, though, they are just a group of unremarkable people who are particularly in love with music, obsessive even. "We like and obsess over lots of different kinds of music and always have since we were little kids," he said recently by phone. "We've been obsessed with music and, especially when we were smaller, pop music."

Some YLT songs seem made of the same magical stuff as the pop hits of old — not a reiteration of the same sounds, but as though they were deconstructed and stitched together with YLT's particular quirk. "It all goes in and comes out of our brains in a less obvious way," McNew says. "But sometimes after we write something it'll occur to me that two bars of a bass part that I've been playing for 10 years came from some other song."

Though Yo La Tengo tour regularly, they've never before played Eugene — no good explanation why not — but McNew thinks they may have played Portland's



Reed College, some 20 years ago. For this roughly two-month tour, YLT are playing two sets of music, the first to be determined by spinning a wheel. They've prepared one of eight different sets of music for whatever fortune or fate is revealed: maybe cover songs, songs with people's names in them, songs starting with 's' (there are a lot of those).

If there's anything missing from YLT's recent music, it's the yearning of a band still learning what they can do. "We've been playing our instruments for 30 years and we got a little better at it from all that practice," says McNew. "But we came in or at least came to the idea of making music and actually being in a band at a time when there was kind of a revolutionary notion that anybody could do it, and we wanted to be proof that anybody *could* do it." **EW**

*Yo La Tengo plays with The Urinals 8 pm Sunday, Feb. 20, at WOW Hall; all ages, \$15 adv., \$18 door.*



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