

# A Certain Sense of Weightlessness

A talk with The Jayhawks' Mark Olson

**L**ike that one ramshackle, half-collapsed barn you pass on the highway year after year, the music created by veteran Minneapolis band The Jayhawks is timeless – in a fragile, verdigised, sepia-toned, windblown, authentically American melancholia sort of way. Their sweetly bittersweet sound, all honeyed harmonies and landlocked blues and melodic rustic reverie, is like a soundtrack caught gorgeously between a hymn to our better selves and an elegy to how we've fallen short.

The Jayhawks' new album, *Mockingbird Time*, is the band's first studio effort since 2003's *Rainy Day Music*, and also the first with singer/songwriter Mark Olson since he left the band in 1995. Guitarist/vocalist Gary Louris took over principal songwriting duties during Olson's absence, and a damn fine job of it he did, especially on The Jayhawks' 1997 tour-de-force, *The Sound of Lies*.

With both Louris and Olson separately honing their skills – they did continue to collaborate occasionally over the years – this much-anticipated recombination of their talents is

not so much a reunion as a further evolution of The Jayhawks' vintage sound. *Mockingbird Time's* opening track, "Hide Your Colors," bursts forth with the unmistakable locomotive power chords that are Louris' trademark, but it's not until you hear Olson's harmonies swirl into the chorus that you understand just how sophisticated this band has become.

For Olson, the passage of time has granted a roadbitten form of wisdom. In a sense, he said over the phone last week, it's almost as if the band is only now coming into its own, and at just the right moment, when trends in music have grown more amenable to what The Jayhawks are all about.

"I remember when one of the main things that was confusing to me, at least in the early days, is that some stuff in our music was more harmony driven," Olson said. "We had an acoustic guitar, but we were playing in these incredibly cranked-out rock venues. I think there was a bit of confusion with those kinds of venues and this kind of music."

The reigning aesthetic during much of the late-'80s/early '90s was loud and then

louder, from the loud/quiet/loud of the Pixies and then Nirvana, to the ear-piercing sonic squelch of fellow Minneapolis bands like Husker Du and Soul Asylum. "There's a lot more to music than that," Olson said. "There's all sorts of sense and feeling and things that go along with playing music."

The recent push by many musicians toward smaller, more intimate shows suits The Jayhawks, who'd be more at home on stage with Bob Dylan than Bob Mould, just dandy. "We have more fans now than we ever did back then," Olson said, adding that the band was "in the wrong place at the wrong time, but at the end of the day it turned out to be a-okay."

Olson said he feels blessed, having traveled all over the world playing music. "I've always had fun," he said. "That's the goal. You have to go out there and feel a certain sense of weightlessness to playing music."

*The Jayhawks and Abigail Washburn with Kai Welch play 8 pm Wednesday, Feb. 8, at McDonald Theatre; \$20/\$25.*



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