



The Raleigh Hatchet, September 2007

Monologue Bombs
Beverages and Ghosts
Superfan Records

The first sound on *Beverages and Ghosts* is that of a drum machine being programmed. Soon, synthesizer cymbals, the kind that sound like the those played by a performing monkey in the streets of Calcutta, perambulate before and behind a voice, that of Scott Phillips, a stirring dichotomy of buoyant texture and gravitas.

Album opener “December ‘83” is the paramount example of a Monologue Bombs song. Deeply personal, but strangely not confessional or of the naval gazing variety; instead Phillips’ canvas is more akin to Polaroids, the ones we all have in baby books or crumbling photo albums locked in the closets of our parents’ old houses.

A funeral where all we can hear is a pop song, the first lessons of empathy, of resilience. Phillips has the uncanny ability to make you feel better by making you feel normal. Like Springsteen, Mangum, or the Mountain Goats John Darnielle, Phillips is not only a great songwriter, he became one by being a great story teller, one whose characters remind us of our uncles or boyfriends or elementary school best friends.

We see our lives and ourselves in his songs so connecting to his music comes naturally. The comparisons to the aforementioned artists are not on accident, with special consideration for the influence of Darnielle on Phillips’ delivery. When he performs as Monologue Bombs (as he is in several other notable local projects including the always excellent Goner and sound engineering antics of Heads on Sticks plus probably a dozen more) it is alone on a stage with a body full of instruments; a one-man accordion-keyboard virtuoso.

Despite the heavy burden of his instruments his voice is surprisingly lithe, and reminiscent of vocalists whose charm resides in the ability to sound like no one else exactly but reminding us of singers already loved. Fans of Neutral Milk Hotel, The Boss, The Boss’ dark brothers in arms- Richard Buckner and Randy Newman or any modern piano balladeer will find this first album infinitely satisfying.

You will take your iPod off shuffle for this album.

Often Phillips is able to pull off what would seem clumsy or inchoate in other hands; like writing songs from the perspective of already established and beloved characters, as in “Chino’s Song”. In the same song, Chino calls to Maria, “It’s a dirty little island/Liquor signs and neon drones/ find us here, far from home, Corazòn”.

Most of the time when white boys try to impersonate brown ones they get it unequivocally wrong, but Phillips sings the Spanish words like they belong to him. You can picture her there, or more accurately, not there: the empty fire escape, the river running by, the sound of water falling off of bodies.

While Phillips may not be Chino exactly, you believe him when he sings in his voice. Imagine R.E.M.’s “Nightswimming” gone Broadway and you’ll start to hear this song. While Sondheim and Bernstein musicals may not be your fortè, remember the story is about star-crossed lovers and the things we do when we are desperate. Again, Phillips is able to make accessible and compelling something previously thought the territory of the other, of drama nerds and mothers.

Three songs in we meet Jason Weaver and hear his story in “Jason’s Song”. A 25 year-old pizza delivery “boy” who dropped out of college but still hangs around campus, transporting pies to students both younger and more tenacious than he. He meets a seventeen-year-old “townie-girl” and heartbreaker who dances with him “at the Lazy Star to some watered-down covers band” but ultimately leaves him for school in Texas and a future that doesn’t include him.

Jason Weaver isn’t just every man, he’s ever dumped man, but one that ultimately concludes that it is better to have gone through with it than never feel the love that blossoms while you “fall asleep in a tangle on the couch”. A vibrant and lively accordion along with the catchiest hook on the record keep the song from being morose, and to the contrary, the sad story of Jason Weaver is another example of how the most acute and significant moments on the record are those that emerge from the contrast between the story and the sound of it being told. You may feel sorry for Jason Weaver, but in the end, you really just want to take him out for tequila shots and a chance to give him another all-nighter to remember.

Phillips is an Anthropologist of relationships, recovering shards of poetry that reveal our intentions like forensic diary entries. He knows that love, like hate, is a thing between two people, and the best way to understand love is to examine what remains after we have left. The next three songs are recovered pieces of relationships.

“The Night You Were Conceived” is about the private language that exists between partners and the mundane images that still hold beauty over us. Every day matters (in both senses), the relief and wonder of finding home. Phillips croons over a softly tinkling keyboard here, very nearly a lullaby, and the shadow of Springsteen stands very near the darker edges of this song.

“Floaters and Empties” is also about the private language between two people, but unlike the gentle affection in “The Night You Were Conceived” the conversation in this song is the torturous kind; a kind of savage intimacy. Mistakes made under street lamps after the rest of the party went to bed and you are left staring at a sink-full of beer bottles and cigarette butts. The jaunty accordion here seems fueled by the energy of regret and makes the last lines sung sting like smoke in your eye: “Sometimes I wish you’d never met me/ We’re so done for, darling Nikki”.

“Corner Lights” is about taking chances, ignoring sense, the risk of letting your self be watched, the possibility of love around the corner, the next person through the door. Characters who only know escape from the minutiae and monotony through the same old drinks, the trysts in dark alleys ultimately allow themselves to believe that something beautiful can exist after all that, can see “Corner lights, little stars that never fall”. Though, it is a precarious kind of tightrope they walk upon, one that can be broken by a few minutes waiting, by self-doubt and anxiety.

“Shadow Tagger” is the most personal of all songs on *Beverages and Ghosts*, a letter to a friend lost unexpectedly. It is the only song where Phillips does not create a character or someone else’s voice to sing in. Phillips’ voice radiates over muted keyboards, though tender as he sings a broken-hearted eulogy “As long as you keep cooling my shoulders/Keep pushing me on/ Keep tagging my shadow/ Sweetheart so-long”. Instantly recognizable as something sincere, honest and above all *true*, this song stands out on an album full of remarkable songs.

Fundamentally an album about relationships, *Beverages and Ghosts* stands above the deluge of records by other, less talented singer songwriters simply by being better at what makes the genre great; the melodies are strong and the stories ring true and compel us to listen and remember.

The songs are never weighted down by the seriousness with which Phillips takes the characters in his songs. Instead the music remains revealing without being maudlin, and snippets of dialogue sung naturally as part of the story being told propel the narratives and the subjects from mere pop songs to pieces of invented history.

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