

Music

BELL ORCHESTRE RECORDING A TAPE THE COLOR OF LIGHT (ROUGH TRADE)
ANIMAL COLLECTIVE FEELS (FAT CAT)

Nu Age

Animal Collective and Bell Orchestre make adventurous music sound awfully boring.

By Jessica Hopper

To invoke the Minutemen: Do you want new wave or do you want the truth?

Here we are, 20 years later, and new wave sounds more and more like new age. We're dealing with a whole new crop of musicians who pass off extreme indulgence as experimentalism and full-on neck beards as a sign of higher consciousness. They cite barely googleable influences so we won't notice the similarities between them and, say, any popular jam band or latter-day solo album by a member of Tangerine Dream. There are a bunch of names floating around for this stuff—nu-folk, freak-folk, New Weird America—but I have my own: new jack hippy-wave (when I am feeling gracious) or downtown bullshit city (the rest of the time). Why, you may ask, am I hatin' on the player and the game? Simple: I do not like being lied to. And the truth is there is no new in this new.

Bell Orchestre, the all-instrumental chamber orchestra side

project of Arcade Fire members Richard Reed Parry and Sarah Neufeld, will likely sell a gazillion copies of their debut, *Recording a Tape the Color of Light* (Rough Trade), based on association alone. It's the sort of thing that might appeal to anyone looking for a more "sophisticated" variation on the irresistible pop drama we've come to expect from their other band. Though I hate to dash the hopes a 7.9 rating on *Pitchfork* instills, unless some consensual, messy frottage between Mike Oldfield and Jean-Luc Ponty is what you're scouring the bins for, consider your parade urinated upon.

The bio that came with the BO record cites the Penguin Cafe Orchestra, the Kronos Quartet, and Arvo Part as influences, which is not only wishful thinking but perhaps a touch perverted, even by the standards of publicist-spun hyperbole. Bell Orchestre has all the ingredients for classical gas—French horn, continued on page 38



Bell Orchestre



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Music

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upright bass, violin, and trumpet—but none of the dexterity or seriousness. They're content with pomp and cheeze, the sort of ham-fisted slop best suited to close-ups of a windswept Leonardo DiCaprio on the deck of the *Titanic* or a 2006 off-road vehicle taking the corners of a majestic mountainside in a commercial. Sure: if you're 19 and "House of Jealous Lovers" is your "Houses of the Holy," then some dog-food-grade violin compositions kicked "disco" with brass and a 4/4 hi-hat beat might sound effing light-years ahead as they pop out of your computer speakers. But let's not sully the work of a 70-year-old Estonian

composer known for his subtle dissonance by connecting it to some Suzuki-method yo-yos from Montreal.

Don't get me wrong: Bell Orchestre has dynamics. Strings purr and rub up against some *really funky chimes*, then build, get quiet—and build again! And there's unsubtle discord in the horn arrangements: the trumpet-French horn duel that drops like a wet turd from the sky a minute and four seconds into "Les Lumieres Pt. 2" sounds like a death match between first chairs in a high school band. It'll make you wish they'd quit the song after Pt. 1. *Recording* melds the push-button dynamics and overwrought gesticulation of a



Animal Collective

Billboard-charting emo band with the edginess of a Windham Hill sampler, and if you're

thinking it doesn't get much worse than that, rest assured: you are correct.

Meanwhile somewhere in Brooklyn sits poor Animal Collective, a group whose best intentions have clearly curdled. Avey Tare, Panda Bear, Geologist, and Deakin issued four albums before their breakthrough 2004 release *Sung Tongs*. Their fresh dispatch, *Feels* (Fat Cat), is a careening, muddled mess, and does the freak-folk ho show with which the band is associated no favors. Perhaps Geologist and Deakin—who didn't participate on *Sung Tongs* but are now back in the mix—are to blame.

Feels fails in all the ways that *Sung Tongs* worked: Where their layered sound-on-sound psych-out was once deep and expansive, now it's sloppy and impenetrable. These are hookless songs buried under a landslide of trebly collages and muffled minutiae. And with seven of the nine tracks running in excess of five minutes, it's apparent that AC lacks not only any clue of how to build songs but also the ability to control them.

Boring is one thing; trying to pass off massage music as experimental is another. *Feels* is the sort of album meant to be augmented by the sound of a \$39 feng shui fountain percolating in the background, because nothing goes with a gurgling plug-in waterspout like songs with copious amounts of rain stick and zither.

The only things keeping Animal Collective from losing their way in the mist are a couple of up-tempo tracks—"Did You See the Words" and "The Purple Bottle"—and the lyrics, which had me recalling (not so fondly)

the first time I took acid, in ninth grade, and spent two hours dealing with a talking enchilada entree. One minute they're singing about staring into a mirror naked and the next they're screaming about a hot tub: it's like some Bret Easton Ellis nightmare starring Jim Morrison. Also, a note to whichever member is responsible for the eleventy-hundred tracks of piano on this album: dude, it's cool to lay off

These are hookless songs buried under a landslide of trebly collages and muffled minutiae.

the sustain pedal sometimes, nothing bad will happen. Especially when you're already dealing with endless tracks of tape delay, loops of percolating bong hits, men imitating roosters, real birds chirping, dulcimer, pennywhistle, and a quartet of aesthetes channeling their spirit animals while a bell chimes in the distance.

Don't be fooled into thinking Animal Collective's recent collaboration with neofolk icon Vashti Bunyan is a sign of their psych authority—if *Feels* is to be taken at face value, they'll be foisting Andreas Vollenweider on us next. **B**



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