

10,000 Maniacs play pure, fresh folk sound

By Charles Lieurance Senior Reporter

It's taken a long time for modern folk music to recover from the verbose aesthetics of Bob Dylan. Those who try to pull folk music back to the purely simple casualness of rural storytelling are usually pushed into irritating obscurity by some pretender to the "poet's" throne.

10,000 Maniacs' completely winning folk style and the off-center delivery of lead singer and irresistible wood sprite, Nancy Merchant, makes "The Wishing Chair" a stunning debut L.P.

Record Review

The lyrics, written mostly by Merchant, have the cool, unadorned simplicity of the best of John Prine's work. Occasionally they take the listener all the way back to Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Ronnie Gilbert.

Most of the time, the music, pure as the best unrecorded mountain music and sometimes an invitation to clog dance, is a delicate and gorgeously layered pastiche of mandolin, pedal steel guitar, accordion, organ, piano and hammer dulcimer.

You might well doubt the folk purist ethic of a band with a name like 10,000 Maniacs and, I'll admit, the band often "lapses" into the jangly rock made popular these days by R.E.M., Let's Active and 28th Day.

Merchant has a strong voice that would be suitable for straight ahead rock 'n' roll but the miracle of the band is how well it works on the folksy tracks.

Merchant sometimes sounds like a hybrid of Emmylou Harris and Pat Benatar.

"Scorpio Rising," co-written by R.E.M.'s Peter Buck, with its Plimsouls-like guitar riff is the hardest rocker on the album and Merchant's voice, all guts and no compromise, whips out the hook:

"If I could calm or restrain

you/for the sake of pity/save the pistol/save the cynic's tongue/save the cool white stare/and treat me to an honest face some-time."

Moving from this to the ornate ballad, "Lily Dale," with its sweeps of acoustic guitar and mandolin, Merchant's voice does not lose an ounce of strength but the power becomes perfectly benevolent.

Images of the bucolic and arcane are so strong in Merchant's lyrics that one can almost smell the lace tablecloths, oak stairways, attic treasures and magnolia.

Like R.E.M., who they opened for at Tuesday night's concert in Omaha, 10,000 Maniacs are heavy on atmosphere. They perform haunted music, echoes and patches of the past, slowly dispersing and losing their inherent melancholy.

There are some flaws on "The Wishing Chair." Some of the music Merchant writes is derivative, almost to the point of plagiarism.

"Maddox Table" for instance has a hook lifted straight from Crosby, Stills and Nash's "Wasted on the Way." This is not a good place to be stealing your choruses. Merchant's sea shanty inflected "Arbor Day" also is dead weight and the lyrics on this one are not much more than a parade of slogans.

Then there are the victories. On "Back O' The Moon," a beautiful single released last year, Robert Buck's acoustic guitar and mandolin play a quick, almost ska riff and an organ bubbles up between verses. The song is completely unique and the sound is a triumph of songwriting, musicianship and production.

The opening track, "Can't Ignore the Train," is similarly the work of a band full of ideas and a gambling spirit.

There are so many fine things on "The Wishing Chair" that listing flaws seems completely nit picky. Melody and substance make the album a triumph and 10,000 Maniacs is another in a refreshing series of American bands with truly indigenous visions.



Merchant David Creamer/Daily Nebraskan

Weekend...

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MOVIES

Cinema 1 and 2, 13th and P streets — "Streetwise," 5:15, 7:15 and 9:15 p.m.; "Krush Groove," 5:30, 7:30 and 9:30 p.m.; Sneak preview of "Once Bitten," Saturday at 7:15 p.m. in place of "Streetwise."

Douglas 3, 1300 P St. — "Jagged Edge," 5:30, 7:35 and 9:40 p.m.; "Target," 5:40, 7:40 and 9:40 p.m.; "That Was Then This is Now," 5:20, 7:20 and 9:20 p.m.

East Park 3, East Park Mall — "Plenty," 5:10, 7:20 and 9:30 p.m.; "Deathwish III," 5:40, 7:40 and 9:40 p.m.; "After Hours," 5:35, 7:35 and 9:35 p.m.

Plaza 4, 12th and P streets — "Better Off Dead," 5:30, 7:30 and 9:45 p.m.; "To Live and Die in L.A.," 5:45, 7 and 9:30 p.m.; "Deathwish III," 5, 7 and 9 p.m.; "Journey of Natty Gan," 5, 7:15 and 9:30 p.m.

Stuart Theatre, 13th and P streets

— "Back to the Future," 5:20, 7:30 and 9:40 p.m.

R.E.M. Southern dream sequence

R.E.M. from Page 10

"Had a dream one night/that the tree had lost its middle/so he built a trunk of chicken wire/to try to hold it up/but the wire turned to lizard skin..."

Peter Buck's guitar playing is as intricate as the weaving on some ancient quilt. Old hands, knuckles smooth as marbles, twitch and make stitch after stitch. His guitar jangles like a pocketful of old confederate coins, the hypnotic pangs of memory... "Thanks," says Michael Stipe. He's gone.

"Wait — Lemme just finish this here dream — this here —" — Carson McCullers, "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter."

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