

Nada Surf - A biography

NADA SURF

Lucky, the title of Nada Surf's fifth album, is at once literal and ironic. Like the songs that singerguitarist Matthew Caws, bassist Daniel Lorca and drummer Ira Elliot crafted for their previous two albums, *Let Go* (2003) and *The Weight Is A Gift* (2005), *Lucky* is filled with images of restlessness, longing and the elusiveness of love. Yet the band counterbalances the lyrical bittersweetness with a musical buoyancy. Intimate songs become in-it-together anthems, thanks to the chiming guitars, propulsive rhythms, and the emotional candor in Caws' vocals. A song like "Beautiful Beat" segues from a sparsely arranged, confessional first verse into a harmonyladen chorus and reaches multi-layered, canon-like proportions before the track fades out. If Caws is often suggesting that romance and resolution may still be an inch or two out of reach, he's also proffering immediate musical solace. Turn up the volume, hit the repeat button, and your troubles, for a blissful three minutes or so, will disappear.

"I tend to be pretty hopeful about things further in the future, but can be relatively anxious about the next eight hours or so," half-jokes Caws, "Unlike my friend John Flansburgh [They Might Be Giants], who says he's manic depressive without the depression, I think I'm manic depressive without the mania. Yet I'm ready to be cheerful at the drop of a reason." That's reflected in the seemingly contradictory minor-key joy in Caws' melodies. As he explains, "My

immediate family is not religious, but we went to church whenever we visited my grandmother in North Carolina at Christmas and Easter. I loved singing hymns and I liked the solemnity of the service and the feeling of release when the pipe organ was played as we walked out. I think I'm always looking for that same rapture in music."

The three members of Nada Surf have played together now for a dozen years. They've survived overnight major-label success and the inevitable morning-after bleariness, persevering past obstacles that would have sunk a less resilient combo to become one of America's most truly

independent bands. Experience has only made their work richer, bringing gravity to the subject matter and lightness to its presentation. Keeping things honest – and often rapturous -- has become a *modus operandi*. Lorca, who first met Caws at their mutual grammar school, explains, "When Matthew and I decided we were going to start our own band and that we were going to sing, we set a couple of rules. One of them was that we would not sing in any affected sort of way, that we would sing the way we talked. Another is that we would write about things that were close to us and about our lives. "

Thus, on Lucky, “Ice on the Wing” references Caws’ family lore: his grandfather’s adventures as a fighter pilot and an ambulance driver in two world wars and his father’s rearing in (and escape/excommunication from) a British religious cult. “See These Bones” was inspired by a visit Caws made a few years back to the Crypt of the Capuchin Monks in Rome, who created a macabre but stirring environmental sculpture from the bones of their departed brethren. (Caws says, “It’s a chilling place. Seeing all those old bones up close really drives home that this is it – and you better make the most of your life. Ultimately, it’s uplifting. I left there in a bizarrely good mood.”) “The Fox” melds the personal and the political, the delusions in a relationship mirroring lies from the government. The image in the chorus – “On the grass at Beachy Head/On the cliff to which you’ve been led” – almost pilfers the scene in the Who’s Quadrophenia when protagonist Jimmy launches his scooter off the enormous grassy cliff on the Southern English coast: “We visited Beachy Head when I was a kid and I remember standing on the slope and sensing that if I took two or three more steps down the soft grass, I would just tumble off. I remember feeling like I was standing right next to death.”

For all the fatalism in the lyrics, there are hints of rapprochement, renewal, maybe even a happy ending. “Are You Lightning?” and “I Like What You Say,” for example, chronicle the beginnings of a long-awaited romance. On “Here Goes Something,” Caws, the father of a young son, deals with the sea-change of excitement and concern that parenthood brings: “Once you’ve brought someone into the world, even if you think that world is going down the tubes, you have no

choice but to be hopeful and root for things to improve.”

The sessions for Nada Surf’s previous album had been a nomadic experience for the band, involving several studios, engineers and mixers. This time, the trio eased into the process with brainstorming sessions at Lorca’s Williamsburg, Brooklyn home that the band dubbed “the sitcom” because, Lorca says, “You’d never know who was going to pop in the door or what was going to happen next.”

“We got together in the loft,” Lorca continues, “and we just played. It was such a low-pressure atmosphere. Some days, instead of sticking to the game plan, we’d play acoustic and cook dinner. Other times, we’d just mess around, have a few laughs and a few drinks and play garage riffs over and over, whatever. One time Coralie Clément was visiting from Paris and she put down a bunch of really creepy, super-high vocal tracks on “The Fox”. Another day we arranged ‘Beautiful Beat’ having lunch with [photographer] Peter Ellenby and his family, right before a photo shoot. We did that sort of thing for a few

months off and on, and then it was time to go to the west coast and record.”

Once settled in Seattle’s Robert Lang Studios, John Goodmanson (Blonde Redhead, Sleater-Kinney), who had mixed part of *The Weight Is A Gift*, produced and mixed all of *Lucky* with due interference from the band. Other players kept popping in the door out there, too. Among the guests were Death Cab For Cutie’s Ben Gibbard (“See These Bones”), Long Winters singer John Roderick (“Ice On The Wing”) and Sean Nelson of Harvey Danger (“See These Bones”). Ed Harcourt contributed piano parts from his home in London for “Weightless” and “Beautiful Beat” and Martin Wenk of Calexico recorded horns for “Ice On The Wing” in his hotel room while on tour. New York City collaborators included keyboardist Louie Lino and session whizabout-town Joe McGinty. Lianne Smith, arguably the most gifted New York vocalist without an album to her name, swaps harmonies with Caws on “The Film Did Not Go Round,” written by NYC indie musician Greg Peterson – “kind of a bluegrass song,” explains Caws, “that I made spookier.” It’s of a piece with the band’s own material, sketching out in a few vulnerably rendered words the parting of lovers at an airport or maybe at the end of their lives: “Everyone’s got to leave their love sometime/If not now than at the end of your lifetime.”

Having survived and thrived, Nada Surf indeed has a lot to feel lucky about. After listening to this new album, though, it becomes clear that we are really the fortunate ones.