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AEM143 Best F-Tigers Forever

Jun 1, 2012 Nate Greenberg

"***Best F-Tigers Forever*** *started out, like all bands do,"* explains frontman **Ralph Hogaboom**, "*with a hitchhiking hairstylist*." He noticed her on the side of the highway between Aberdeen and Montesano, Washington. He might have been driving too fast to size up the punk-rocker haircut but he must have noticed the guitar on her back and the thumb she held up high. In a matter of seconds, he made the obvious choice-he pulled over and picked her up.

That hitchhiker turned out to be **Heather Aiken** who, despite the guitar on her back, turned out to be a bassist, involved in a number of local bands. They spent the drive geeking out about music and, before parting, exchanged contact information. Later, Hogaboom invited her over for a jam session. If Aiken found it bizarre or awkward that the jam session entailed a family dinner with the Hogabooms, she clearly didn't mind. She thanked them with a dessert of haircuts for all. The jam session continued past midnight, culminating with an episode of Mystery Science Theater 3000. After a few such productive sessions, the unlikely friends decided that it was time to turn it into something official and posted an ad on Craigslist to recruit a drummer for the fledgling

project. The odds of finding a suitable musician who won't try to murder you with an ax while you're asleep aren't much greater on Craigslist than on the side of the road. Luckily **Dewain Clark**, who turned out to be not only not-a-psychopath but also a capable drummer and multi-instrumentalist, responded to the notice.

The newly-formed trio quickly churned out a set of original tunes about all the usual topics-"*love and biology,"* clarifies **Hogaboom**-and recorded them in a basement studio. In the brief lapses between "*hitting the red REC light,"* and the studio owners children "*busting in,"* **Best F-Tigers Forever** managed to complete a four-track EP, **How To Care For Your Pet Fire**, from which both featured tracks are drawn. The group's next move was to recruit a fourth member, **Britta Folden**, to replicate and build upon extra parts (keyboard and vocals) that had been overdubbed in the studio, and to prepare a live show That, more or less, brings us up to the present. From seeds that appear in equal parts fairy-tale and everyday-accident, Best F-Tigers Forever has grown into a band that maintains basically the same balance. Lacking in aspiration but overflowing in inspiration, finding confidence in their bashfulness, there the kind of band we all wish we could be in.

I should note, however, that the story actually begins long before the fateful first encounter between Hogaboom and Aiken on the shoulder of Route 12, for it is this prehistory that may provide the best introduction to the music. Those of you who've jumped ahead and listened to the tracks before reading this review may have noticed something familiar about **Hogaboom's** distinctive vocal style. If you were struggling to remember where you heard it, I'll go ahead and ruin the suspense: **AEM052 Redbird Fever**.

When **Hogaboom** offered **Aiken** a ride, did he show her the recordings of his band which, regrettably or fortuitously, was falling apart at the time? Oh, of course, he must have. And when Aiken offered to help him find a new drummer for **Redbird Fever**, which soon collapsed, did she suspect that she would end up helping him find a whole new band, in which she herself would be a member? **Best F-Tigers Forever** inherits several of the qualities that drew me to Redbird Fever. Emotionally honest to the point of extreme awkwardness, Best F-Tigers Forever wins us over by simply being themselves.

Hogaboom's new compositions are more straightforward than the old ones, forgoing complexity for the sake of coherence, yet never sacrificing the characteristic playfulness. The addition of bass-whose intentional absence marked Redbird Fever-provides a more stable foundation that roots the uncensored gush of emotion that, otherwise, could spin out of control. Meanwhile, **Clark's** beats-energetic and often a hair ahead of time-create the illusion of acceleration while, in fact, cementing the groove. It's this unlikely balance that allows the listener to sense purpose and direction in the sublime sighs of tenderness that dot the EP, and reminds us to catch our breath in anticipation of the next euphoric eruption of dance. We feel this most viscerally in **A-Side "Apostrophes,"**

an anthem that epitomizes the 'emotional' in emo-minus the obnoxious whining and self-righteous depression. It's a well constructed composition with a catchy and convincing sense of urgency that pervades the highs and lows alike. The most obvious focal point of the music, nevertheless, remains Hogaboom's voice or, more precisely, his vocal style. His unusual and awkward lyrics careen up and down the register in flamboyant arpeggios, sometimes escaping in hiccoughs of passionate yelps. I would call it operatic, but that label wouldn't do it justice-while Hogaboom's vocals clearly draw upon operatic archetypes, they resemble more closely the mock-opereratic yodeling that most of us would only dare to attempt in the shower, when we're sure nobody is listening. If Hogaboom's 'money notes' wind up a shade flat (and believe me, they do) it only makes them more sincere. In **B-Side "I Will Carve,"** Hogaboom and Aikens share the mic in alternating verses that hint at conversation, often overlapping, and sometimes aligning in unexpected but satisfying blips of unison.

Best F-Tigers Forever exudes an optimism rare in indie rock-a love for life that I find both unusually sincere and thoroughly refreshing. That said, the music does not shy away from darker themes. "*I've been told [**B-Side "I Will Carve"**] is about cutting,*" explains **Hogaboom**. "*I don't think it is; not for me. To me, it's about the fear of losing someone*," -a theme he deems "*less violent, but more sad."* Whatever the song means to you, the striking part is the artist's ability to find hope and strength in sadness. The lyrics weave an extended metaphor about sewing that Hogaboom relates to his wife. "*She creates these things, and they're all personal. They're an extension of herself,"* he explains. And yet, these elaborate works of art that she creates with a needle, thread, and fabric, are not permanent. *"It's just this object that can be cut, torn, sewn up, worn, used, even sold or thrown away. And I think that's a really interesting way of looking at relationships. We can put care into it, hours of work over fine details that aren't visible to someone else. And when someone leaves you, the thread in that relationship just comes apart, the relationship as clothing just starts falling apart. All the pieces, you might as well just cut them up and throw them away, because the garment is no longer good without that thread. "*

When **Hogaboom** shared these thoughts with me, I wondered whether he was talking about relationships or bands. He admitted that it could be both and, besides, perhaps the line behind the two isn't so clear. He probably felt a bit of that when **Redbird Fever** parted ways. I've certainly felt a bit of that every time one of the bands I've worked so hard to build collapsed. But these miniature catastrophes are what, in the long run, fuel artistic evolution and, in the short run, force us not to take our work to seriously. However fragile the band may be, **Best F-Tigers Forever** manages to remain hopefully rooted in the moment. "*Redbird Fever took itself seriously... BFTF is out for a good time, mostly. Oh, we can whine about love lost too, but I think we're subconsciously setting up each song for a party moment."* After all, this is coming from a band goofy enough to call itself Best F-Tigers Forever. What does the F stand for? "*The F is for Friends,"* I've been told_. "If you were thinking the other common F abbreviation, well, I'm going to

tell your mother you were thinking that. It's Best F-Tigers Forever, because Best Friends Forever was already taken."_ Forget the commercial or artistic ambitions that fuel most bands-Hogaboom pitched Best F-Tigers to me as the hottest new indie band "*sweeping the kitchen sink."* Within this pun so stupid it could have come from a high-school jazz band director, we may glimpse the self-fulfilling semblance of truth. Nobody's pretending to be hip here. I have my suspicions, though, that the band was aware of the other abbreviation (go ahead, tell my mom, I dare you!) and that any claims to the contrary are just them 'friending' around with us. That's part of the act.

After centuries of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and biology, we still haven't managed to find the perfect algorithm for human taste. Nobody can adequately explain what we like and why we like it and, even less fruitful, have been the efforts to forecast our preferences. I don't like carrots and I'm not generally fond of cakes, so why is it that I like carrot cake? Explain that one, consumer research! But really, we should be thankful for this inexplicable enigma of taste, without which all we who attempt to make a living through creativity would inevitably lose our jobs to computers.

Geeky, awkward, unpolished, and down-to-earth, **Best F-Tigers Forever** represents a series of inputs that any computer program would have dismissed as a recipe for failure yet we find ourselves seduced by the personal touches on the recordings and being to root root root for the careers of these underground underdogs. Because, however much we may wish to think of ourselves as logical beings, we so often find ourselves swayed by the mysterious pull of pathos… Because, however much we may wish that all bands started out with a hitching hairstylist, the regrettable truth is that it perhaps no other band ever has begun that way. If such foundations are entirely too whimsical to believe in, the more we need to believe.

Apostrophes

0:00 / 4:32

If You Go I Will Carve

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