

Arts & Life

CD Review: Yo La Tengo forever 'Popular'

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Formed in 1984, Yo La Tengo is the quintessential indie rock band, still on independent label Matador after 12 solid LPs. Still, the title of their newest album, "Popular Songs," is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the band's lack of mainstream success. The magic of Yo La Tengo lies in nuanced emotions and a rare sense of pacing and equilibrium-not exactly the precursors of widespread popularity.

"Popular Songs" displays the delicate craftsmanship of its skilled creators, husband and wife duo Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley and bassist James McNew. "Here to Fall" begins in a recognizably Yo La Tengo fashion. Reverberating wa wa-pedaled guitar, crashing cymbals and somber string accompaniments create melodrama, though

Kaplan sounds self-assured when he sings, "I know you're worried/ I'm worried too/ But if you're ready/ I'm here to fall with you."

The distinctive crooning of Hubley counterpoints the opener, floating airily amid jangly guitar and organ on "Avalon or Someone Very Similar."

A dynamic balance is masterfully extended throughout: "By Two's" gives Hubley's voice breathing room, allowing it to glide along gently, before "Nothing to Hide" picks up the pace with a crunching guitar stomp akin to Yo La Tengo's noisier side project, Condo F-s. The last three tracks, clocking

in at nine, 11 and 15 minutes respectively, allow Kaplan to exercise his guitar prowess-though the effect of 35 consecutive minutes is definitely numbing.

The album is executed so effortlessly it may appear underwhelming, or at least unassuming. Truthfully, it doesn't carry the emotional heft or sparkling beauty of some of their greatest work, at least not throughout the entire album. "Popular Songs" is, however, consistently good, and often very good -- one of the great bands of today honing their craft with sophistication and grace.

Perhaps all that popularity business is immaterial for a band like Yo La Tengo. As the title of one of their prior compilation albums asserts, "Genius + Love = Yo La Tengo." That will be their musical legacy -- one more lasting than fleeting chart success.





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