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CD REVIEW



PATRICK WATSON

Wooden Arms (Secret City/EMI)
★ ★ ★ ½ (out of 4)

The Patrick Watson band's transfixing 2006 sophomore album, *Close to Paradise*, cued up one of those all-too-rare moments when popular taste and music-as-capital-A-Art briefly aligned.

Now, having attained a species of notoriety at home in Canada after winning the Polaris Music Prize in 2007, Watson and his indispensable band mates — bassist Mishka Stein, guitarist Simon Angell and drummer Robbie Kuster — unveil a follow-up whose jaw-dropping depth and invention will almost surely solidify the brewing international following fostered by the heavy touring and effusive word-of-mouth for *Close to Paradise*.

One hesitates to invoke the likes of Björk, Tom Waits and Radiohead in association for fear of jinxing the lads' chances, but *Wooden Arms* is up there with the best in cracked-mirror pop music. It's out there — almost defiantly so at times — yet it makes such a lustroly tuneful bid for the fringes that any mainstream curiosity has no choice but to follow. Watson and Co. obviously have no interest in meeting anyone halfway.

They don't have to. In the band's hands, "arty" doesn't mean driving more pop-minded listeners away with unnecessary clutter and obfuscation. If anything, *Wooden Arms* is more clear-headed than *Close to Paradise* in presenting the Montreal band's surreal blur of baroque piano balladry, brainy modern-classical composition and prog-rock sound sculpture. The arrangements are barer, eschewing density for inspired illustration. And even though Watson's tunes thrive on madcap sonic collisions, it makes perfect sense in context for the title track's lovely duet with Lhasa de Sela to be cast as a kind of funhouse neo-Weimar cabaret, or for cooing, Bacharach-esque "ba-ba-baahs" to share space with Katie Moore's tormented Dolly Parton warble on "Big Bird in a Small Cage." "Moan Like You," for its part, holds up without embellishment, stripping things back to a feathery acoustic-folk whisper worthy of Nick Drake himself. Get into it before the hype spoils it for you.

DOWNLOAD: "Wooden Arms." More Bizarro-world crooning in the vein of *Close to Paradise*'s "The Storm."

Ben Ravner