

EAR CANDY

Athens Blur Magazine

Issue 10

September 4, 2009

Bowerbirds

Upper Air

“One morning you wake to find you are shackled to your bed and bound and gagged. Oh my, what a predicament.” So opens *Upper Air*, the second album from Raleigh, North Carolina’s Bowerbirds, a visceral and often vivid exploration of love, self and nature. Picking up where 2007’s *Hymns for a Dark Horse* left off, vocalist/guitarist Phil Moore and multi-instrumentalist Beth Tacular construct songs out of soft edges and earthbound metaphors, honing their craft into a series of musty folk-pop songs that refine but rarely depart from their template of strummed acoustic guitars and mewing accordions. Moore remains a captivating presence, using his softly mellifluous croon to bring to life a cast of stately pines, diamond houses, nervous coyotes, and wandering minds to weave together a multi-layered exploration of man’s relationship to himself, others and the earth. To that end, the expansive imagery tends toward New Age tropes every now and again, but Tacular’s bittersweet touches of violin, piano and accordion help steer Moore back from the edge of freak-folk platitudes. The arrangements provide remarkable replay value, revealing new countermelodies and textural shifts with every listen, from the slowly awakening percussion underneath the gorgeous melodic twists of “Silver Clouds” to the atmospheric rumbling and autoharp strums on the closing “This Day.” All in all, *Upper Air* surveys a unique internal landscape, one whose words create a mood of mystery and whose melodies ache with sincerity, an album that announces its presence in its first moments and continues the conversation until its last.

(Matt Fink)