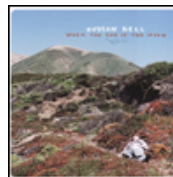


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Hudson Bell

When the Sun is the Moon
Monitor
2005
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There's a frightening amount of things going right on *When the Sun Is the Moon*. Baton Rouge via Oakland singer/guitarist Hudson Bell and his highly capable band mates have put out an inspiring and exhilarating release. *When the Sun Is the Moon* won't get anyone dancing feverishly at New York City nightclubs or find itself astride the trumped-up artistes that populate the top ten lists on your favorite blog. What it will do, if given the opportunity, is serve as a reminder of what earnest and thoughtfully constructed rock music can sound like and how music can be a refreshing shot of dusty, rollicking adrenal exuberance. The sound of Hudson Bell makes perfect sense as an amalgam of their geographical pedigree—the same rootsy strains of the American South that inspired Neil Young grafted onto the lackadaisical, West Coast ambling of Stephen Malkmus. Though only seven tracks long, this album is packed with enough tightly wound melodies and joyously anthemic choruses to entertain and invigorate for some time.

"Slow Burn" opens the album like the smoldering tip of a lit cigarette, as lightly plucked notes are softly interspersed with a vicious rush of fuzzy digging from Bell's lead guitar. It's not a shocking, out-of-place interjection, but rather a roughly hewn gouge that imprints the song's melody even deeper, making it tangible. The overdriven guitars plunge and dive all over the song, and once Bell's delightfully evocative and plainly sung lyrics enter the scene, it'd be easy to mistake it for a bonus track on the "Luxe and Redux" reissue of *Slanted and Enchanted*. The band creaks like a rusty gate in the background, swinging ably along the sun-fried panorama they've developed. When the chorus develops a slight stutter from a subtly placed tape loop amidst the swirling fray, Hudson Bell has succeeded in demonstrating that they're a little deeper than one might have assumed.

The steadily driving "Atlantis Nights" surges forth with short breakouts of swirling distortion as a simple swim evolves into a fantasy expedition into the deep sea. It's extremely brief—barely long enough to discern the song's true intentions—but what is left behind is a sure feeling of satisfaction, as if someone's memory of a warm summer road trip has been implanted in your brain. The speed with which the song departs makes it a strong candidate for the "repeat" setting or at least several quick pokes at the "previous" button. Then one can spill out into "The Falls," which flows so naturally from "Atlantis Nights" that it might have made sense to couple them into one song, or perhaps a suite. It's a lazy respite after the frenetic burst of activity on the previous track; the long, sleepy drive home. It's here that the album's title appears and reveals itself as sort of an encapsulation of the dusky, dreamy spirit of languor that dominates "The Falls" and can be felt as a strong undercurrent throughout the album.

"The Midnight Year" dredges up memories of hometowns and addresses self-consciousness and self-exploration in Bell's quirky, abstracted lyrics before shifting down into a slowcore waltz tempo instrumental. The lyrics follow the dotted lines and sketchy paths drawn by Bell from moons to bars and other remote, dejected scenes that seem utterly romantic when cloaked in the song's crisp gallop. In case the deeper concerns are missed, "Strange Lands" makes it clear that the protagonist in the middle of the mini-drama of the album's second half isn't enjoying the journey as much as we are. Still, by the end of the song, the band is once again showing their dynamic indulgences, peaking out on fuzz and ferocity and swooping back down to lilting acoustic phrasing where it suits them. From the beginning of *When the Sun Is the Moon* all the way to the final, tidal lapping of "Sea Horse," there's rarely a moment that isn't showcasing the band's sublime nature, whether it's in a stabbing riff or incisive lyric. "I can see in your eyes how planets begin," Bell sings, and captures the sense of awe in simplicity that makes this album so appealing. What's going right on this album becomes evident. It never sounds like it's trying to placate the listener, nor win the listener over to its side. The album is what it is—Hudson Bell's creation has no target beyond its own existence and self-fulfilling beauty, and achieves a remarkable level of power in the process.



Reviewed by: Michael Patrick Brady

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