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## Wooden Wand & the Sky High Band

Second Attention  
Kill Rock Stars  
2006  
B



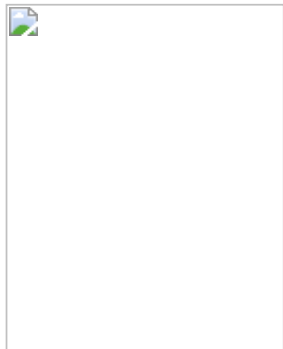
Wooden Wand's folky, esoteric predilections have produced an album that should stop trying to be better than it is. *Second Attention* is exceptionally listenable, a well-composed group of bright and infectious folk-rock that is often frustratingly memorable; and yet there's an undercurrent of premeditation and contrivance that stands out like a day-glow dashboard Christ or diamond-encrusted cross pendant.

The touchstones for the songs of *Second Attention* aren't the typical obscure and forgotten strummers that the so-called New Weird America is so fond of name checking. Sure, there's some of that in there, but the prevailing sound of this record is the chugging, workhorse-like rhythm and phrasing of Norman Greenbaum's evergreen rock-and-roll hymn "Spirit in the Sky." The parallels, to me, seem quite apparent and uncanny in that *Second Attention* not only inherits the aural thickness and restraint of Greenbaum's 1970 hit, but also its religious and contextual ambiguities. "Spirit in the Sky" is famous for bringing Jesus to the top of the pop charts, selling millions of copies, and creating a folksy homage to religion and spirituality that the whole family could enjoy. The religious themes of the song, however, were merely adornment—the song was not intended as a Christian anthem, nor was it the product of some personal expression of faith. In fact, Greenbaum was a Jewish university student from Boston, who wrote the song as an experiment, a pastiche of religious catchphrases and platitudes. It exists as a still-life, a compilation of beliefs rendered in formulaic terms, and its wild success is a testament not only to the power of a fantastically catchy bass line but to the lazy, shallow way in which people react to language pre-loaded with power yet devoid of real meaning.

As the opening chords of Wooden Wand's "Crucifixion, Pt II" kicked off the album, I couldn't help but sense that same shallowness. The song is catchy, and I found it nearly impossible to shake the tune from my head once I heard it, but Wooden Wand is clearly playing the same game as Greenbaum. There's virtually no discernible reason for this song to be called "Crucifixion, Pt II." The lyrics are the meandering, free-associative sort typical of post-millennial indie-folk, and overall are quite impressive. As a songwriter, Wooden Wand has a knack for rhyme and rhythm, and though his songs may lack narrative and plot, the simple syllabic pleasure he wrings out of each word makes the journey pleasurable enough. Still, throughout *Second Attention*, he feels the need to anchor his linguistic Rorschachs to a few choice keystone words—words that come prescribed with gravity and import, like God, Madonna (Bat Jacob, not Ciccone), Crucifixion, Lucifer etc. They're effectively employed—Wooden Wand weaves them in expertly, and they create the illusion that the songs have a consistent and tangible theme.

"Portrait in the Clouds," for instance, implies some kind of Constantine-like vision of salvation, but uses God as window-dressing on an otherwise fine song. In a way, I'd like to hear the songs of *Second Attention* with these easy call-outs to religious tradition excised or replaced with nonce words—I think the songs would be just as great and would be spared the feeling of exploitation. Though they try to be, it's clear that these songs are in no way grounded in any real religiosity, and their lofty aspirations only overshadow what would be some great secular sing-a-longs.

Most people won't care how Wooden Wand uses religious imagery, and that's fair. The songs don't suffer too much from it, but they do demand comparison to works that occupy the same thematic space, which really isn't fair. David Tibet's latest Current 93 release *Black Ships Ate the Sky* is saturated with Christ references, but the seriousness and severity he gives them demonstrates that his use is fraught with personal emotion. The many versions of the hymnal standard "IDUMAEA" on that disc shows how truly magnificent and majestic music inspired by true faith, passion, and reverence can be. *Second Attention* does itself a disservice by inviting such juxtapositions, obscuring an otherwise fantastic album.



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