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Two Gallants - What The Toll Tells (Saddle Creek)

UK release date: 13 February 2006

★★★★★



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Things happen when bands produce their own records. There's the chance for dodgy self-editing, intimacy too, and, maybe, in seclusion, novelty.

What The Toll Tells could only be self-produced. Four songs top eight minutes, the vocals catch on tobacco phlegm and it sounds like no other music. Two Gallants - from San Francisco; named, with splendid pretension, after the Joyce story - have made a really new sound here. The basis is country (harp, papery drums, messy but chiming guitars), but it's mixed with a dose of math-rock experimentation.

track listing

1. Las Cruces Jail
2. Steady Rollin'
3. Some Slender Rest
4. Long Summer Day
5. Prodigal Son
6. Threnody
7. 16th Street Dozens
8. Age Of Assassins
9. Waves Of Grain

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The songs don't play to normal structures: there are tempo changes, counter-rhythmical freak-outs, tracks that are slightly - deliciously - out of time with each other. Nothing is allowed to settle for too long.

It's not really an easy listen, but it is an exciting one, even if the math-rock element seems, as it tends to, a little cold. The first bars of 16th Street Dozens alternate massive feedback and jazz scales, silence and violent drumming - very energetic, but despite the barroom brawl the song becomes, strangely joyless. A little too much like **Gastr Del Sol** improvising in a museum.

Such moments are thankfully rare, though, even if the conspicuous intellectualism continues throughout. Mostly, in fact, this is all to the good, and fashions some really great lyrics: "The" Oh no, the sky is falling, lets all pray for rain," goes Waves of Grain.

There's good wit too - Steady Rollin' frames its happy-go-lucky attitude in light-hearted murder: "I shot my wife today / Dropped her body in the 'Frisco bay / I had no choice."

Even in this is the combination of sadness and bravery that marks so much of the record. Maybe the experimentalism seems so blank because the album's emotional core is so strong elsewhere. Those words should really sound stupid, antiquated - like **Jack White** on his quest for manners and a good moustache comb - but, as on the first single Las Cruces Jail, it's plain that they mean what they play.

There are scarily honest performances everywhere on this album, and at its strongest - on Las Cruces Jail and Some Slender Rest - the music is both richly defiant and basically lonely. It's a fine combination - not comforting, but entralling. And if the album has flaws, it has great and unique strengths. Difficult, maybe, but captivating.

- Luke Ingram

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