



Album Swap

Gareth Stack

Vs.

Darragh McCausland

(Two men, four ears, two CD's, and two dubious psychology degrees)

Photography: Sinead Kelly

Counting Crows - This Desert Life

Gareth says:

The mention of Seattle folk rock sevenosome Counting Crows arises in me the awkward defensiveness of intense ambivalence. This is undeniably the band who sold their scant credibility for an eternal plate at the corporate buffet - whether it be butchering Joni Mitchell's eco ballad 'Big Yellow Taxi' or penning soundtrack filler like 'Accidentally in Love', a song so risible it tainted *Shrek 2*. But the Crows are also the band that provided the soundtrack to my adolescence - perfectly encapsulating heartbreak on every note of their critically acclaimed (and internationally platinum selling) debut 'August and Everything After' - navigating the tyranny of first loves, and the infinite anguish of puppy rejection. 'This Desert Life', the Crows third album, all theremin and Hollywood melodrama, mulls over the consequence of the success wrought by that first work of maudlin genius. Self indulgent? Indubitably. But no one articulates bittersweet melancholy better than Adam Duritz, and no one fuses the downhome alt country poetry of Gram Parsons with the epic mythologising of Springsteen, quite like Counting Crows.

Darragh says:

You know how you judge someone as cool even though you don't really know them all that well? That's what I used to think about Gareth. I had him down as a witty, convivial guy with refined taste in music and pop culture, able to hold a few pints and discuss the European cup final or latest indie-schmindie release with the trendies. That was until this experiment. Gareth gave me an album by *The Counting Crows* to review. Suddenly, I don't know him any more. My acquaintanceship with Gareth now feels like the tag-line to a summer blockbuster movie -

THIS SUMMER...ALL YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW ABOUT GARETH...WILL CHANGE...FOR EVER.

Prior to the swap I resolved to come at it with an open mind. I pictured myself in the lotus position, dreaming of a blank velvety void and emptying all preconceptions of popular music from my ipod-raped cranium. However, I didn't count on the 'Crows. I always lumped them in with 'Hootie and the Blowfish' as a band that the characters from 'Friends' might like. Additionally, the early noughties experience of hearing the breathless verbal overload of 'Mr Jones' dozens of times during shitty student nights (once coupled with a lapful of my own puke) means I have a Pavlovian aversion to *The Counting Crows* that Zen meditation cannot possibly overcome. However, we can thank God for the small mercy that 'Mr Jones' does not appear on the album Gareth gave me, 'This Desert Life'.

Before I go into details about what I think about this record, I want to admit to a deeply humiliating and repugnant thing. I am subscribed to an Internet music site called Last FM. The site records everything you listen to while on the Internet, and builds a profile based on your musical tastes for all your online mates to see. It's a sort of public musical representation of your inner fan. When I was listening to *Counting Crows* for this article, I was tempted to switch the site off so people wouldn't know I was listening to this sort of music. I didn't, but I did consider it. That would have instantly made me the type of vile hipster I typically rant noisily about after a few drinks. So, regardless of whether I like 'This Desert Life' or not, thank you Gareth for helping me recognise my inner twat.

As for 'This Desert Life', it starts off thrillingly. A chunky guitar riff and bar piano chords announce a song about the monotony of small town life. It's called 'Hanging Around'. I like it a lot. Was it always on MTV ten years ago? I think so. It sounds very familiar, and not a million miles from *The Hold Steady* both lyrically and musically. Like the song, the rest of the album is very produced, but unfortunately not as catchy. Well not after four listens anyway. I guess an overall polished sound was in mind when these guys were in the studio. The lyrics lack polish though. They are cluttered, earnest and sometimes cheesy, but not manipulative the way a lot of post-REM tripe is. It would seem that nearly everything *The Counting Crows* sing is sincere. Adam Duritz is genuinely bleeding his heart out. An exception might be 'Mrs Potter's Lullaby'. This slick eight-minute piano-based Nashville workout about being the perpetual odd man out at the party strikes a disingenuous note. It's as if they are trying to mine the same lucrative seam that sprung 'Mr Jones'.

I will probably never connect with this sort of music. I'm just not that into classic American rock. But there is no denying the record's honesty. And if I didn't have such deep-seated issues with 'Mr Jones' and the lead singer's dreadlocks, I'm sure I'd like it more.

Brian Eno - Music For Airports

Darragh says:

Brian Eno's 'Ambient 1. Music for Airports' is widely regarded as *the* classic ambient album. Some people have funny ideas about ambient music, perhaps associating it with the sort of CDs that you see for sale on obscure digital TV channels, and which consist of nauseating pan-pipes punctuated by whale's mating calls. 'Music for Airports' is nothing like that sort of dross. It is a meticulously arranged set of four skeletal pieces of music which unfold slowly in such a way that the overlapping arrangements never once repeat. The mood is somewhat neutral. I think the music sort of absorbs mood rather than evokes it, so listening is always a tranquilising experience. Aural Valium maybe? It is also a ridiculously beautiful piece of work. When I hear those languid shifting parts I think of moving sculptures, mobiles perhaps, or those old fashioned models of the solar system with the planets in perpetual motion. Why did I choose this for Gareth? He seems stressed out sometimes. He might need a bit of aural Valium in his busy life.



Gareth says:

Brian Eno, Christ, isn't he that 'Microsoft Sound' (tm) chap who co-wrote those snowbird Bowie LPs? Didn't he build some sort of ever lasting eco clock? Even the name 'Eno' sounds like a new age mantra performed at peyote solstice by a levitating Terence McKenna. Given Darragh's penchant for experimental techno, I'm expecting John Cages 4'33", performed as a rollerskate chiptune triphopera. What emerges from 'Music for Airports' is instead, a tortuously minimal contemporary classical soundscape, gradually constructed through piano and vocal loops. My limited touchstones for ambient music are the soundtrack to Godfrey Reggio's visually arresting documentary *Koyaanisqatsi*, Aphex Twin's 'Selected Ambient Works', and Vangelis's music for *Blade Runner*. All of which are unquestionably evocative, despite their simplicity. Eno's work on *Music for Airports* is if anything, even more bare bones. The swelling vocal harmonies of 2/1 (give the tracks a name already!), are utterly simple yet profoundly sorrowful, like the slow sustained melodies of millennial Christian plainsong. For music intended presumably to calm (Wikipedia tells me this album was originally intended to 'diffuse the tension' at LaGuardia airport), the auditory uncanny valley of Eno's synthesised vocals becomes at times deeply unsettling. Each piece builds on the last, so that what begins with basic piano (1/1) and vocal (2/1) loops becomes a mournful medley by 1/2. The final side of Eno's LP, a light yet grandiose new age track, entitled, predictably enough '2/2', bares the most resemblance to Vangelis's 'body of work'. In fact it's so similar to the single track that Partheon loon has been reissuing under different titles throughout his career, that I'm surprised Eno didn't issue proceedings. *Music for Airports* acts as a palette cleanser - I found myself listening, really listening, for the first time in too long, to everything played immediately afterward. In conclusion, *Music for Airports* - less pretentious, more emotive and melodically complex than it at first appears, yet for the most part unobtrusively appealing. Om mani padme hum. Perhaps there's virtue in simplicity after all.