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Dusted Features

For the next installment of our Destined series, Dusted's Nathan Hogan examines the haunting music of Brooklyn's The Last Town Chorus.

Destined: The Last Town Chorus

Country has consistently proven to be one of the most malleable forms in contemporary music. Musicians who've approached it as a potent stylistic ingredient rather than an institutional absolute have repeatedly demonstrated its expressive capacity, its willingness to meld with seemingly incongruous sounds and styles. Still, Megan Hickey may be the first person inspired to start a band in order to realize country's affinity with polished '80s dream-pop. "Standing in my living room on 4th Avenue in Brooklyn," Hickey recalls, "I had a sudden and certain feeling about a musical sound – the push of solid ethereal pop (a la Cocteau Twins' *Heaven or Las Vegas*) and the pull of country songs, all doused in the feeling of life in New York City." Soon after that minor revelation, Hickey was introduced to a guitarist named Nat Guy and an old lapsteel – both on the same day. The Last Town Chorus was effectively born.

"The feeling for The Last Town Chorus existed first," Hickey insists. "All the elements fell in line behind it." What's unusual is the instrument that ended up in the front of that line; on every track of Hickey and Guy's self-titled debut the lapsteel guitar – used so frequently for measured, textural backing – is played with atypical prominence. Hickey wrestles a swirling, melodic warble out of the instrument, a sound that's somehow both lushly atmospheric and solemnly austere. On songs like "Ten Mile" and "Oregon" the delay and stereo effects twist the lapsteel's familiar, lonesome wail into watery little ribbons that burst forth and dissolve, toying coyly with Guy's steady, understated acoustic guitar. "I have no training, I am violent with (the lapsteel) at times, so it may as well be another instrument," Hickey says. "It ends up being a glorious sound really, and I'm still in awe of it myself." In a sense it's the perfect link between the two styles that Hickey and Guy originally set out to conjoin; by drenching a staple instrument of Nashville backing bands in delay effects, the duo successfully recreates the rich pop ether of the great 4AD bands in an innovative and organic way.

Casiotone for the Painfully Alone - Twinkle Echo	<p>Complimenting the quiet resplendence of the duo's instrumentation is Hickey's voice. She has an inflection that reminds one vaguely of Rickie Lee Jones, but Hickey holds her notes longer, in a manner more sorrowful and with fewer of Jones' Flying Cowboys acrobatics. Even in songs like "Dear City", about sticky summer nights, Hickey's is a voice that glows with warmth – a fixed emotional presence in the eerie, echoing environs evoked by the wailing steel. The territories the band explores are disparate, from smoky Tennessee juke joints ("Ten Mile") to docks where old lovers come and go ("Brooklyn Navy Yard, 1950"), but there's a sense about all of them that, despite the human relationships and entanglements in question, they're hardly peopled places. It's a quality that also pervades the band's visual aesthetic; Guy doubles as an artist and photographer, and his images – displayed on the band's website (http://www.lasttownchorus.com) and regular email updates – emotionally unite crumbling, rural locales with sepia-toned images of American cities. It's a similar interface to the one happening in The Last Town Chorus' music – at least partially. "(Nat and I) both grew up in suburbs and outskirts of medium-sized towns," says Hickey. "The Last Town Chorus is probably more about the emotional interface between life in these sad and charming little places, and life in the cities that we (and so many others) have moved to in search of vibrancy. One simply can't have both, and it's a bittersweet, transitory feeling to long for both. That's the emotional core of The Last Town Chorus."</p> <p>Since forming a couple years ago, the duo has found receptive audiences in the warm, dimly lit Brooklyn clubs where they play – places like Pete's Candy Store, Barbes, and Southpaw. When asked about recent gigs with fellow travelers like Hem, Amy Allison, Greta Gertler and Pete Galub, Hickey remarks that she feels as though the band is part of something tangible happening in the area of south Brooklyn where they reside – "something tuneful and evocative and refreshingly free of irony." Live the duo has been known to flesh out their sound a bit, living up to their proclaimed essence as a chorus. "We've included everyone from a concert violinist, bluegrass stand-up bassist, pop pianist, punk rock drummer, and virtuoso spazz guitarist to a dulcimer player," says Hickey, "we just had to get that first album out primarily as a duo while that early crop of songs were most alive and pure."</p> <p>In many respects the template has been set for the band, but not set in stone. The harrowing nine songs that comprise their debut were determinedly self-released, but Hickey says they're now looking at options for moving things outward. "Sometimes I'd love to leapfrog to a few years from now," she says, "when, god willing, we're entrenched enough to be sustained by a direct relationship with the people that care about our music – meaning, directly offer them the recorded music at a fair price, and perform in crumbling old churches by rivers because they've asked us to: a mutual, honest relationship." If The Last Town Chorus has their way, we can look forward to fliers for that riverfront show on the telephone poles of all the towns and cities that their songs evoke so elegantly. In the meantime, their debut is an exquisite introduction.</p>
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