



Album reviews: Broken Bells, Bombay Bicycle Club, Robin McKelle & The Flytones, Sarah Jarosz, Maximo Park, Seth Lakeman

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Broken Bells "After the Disco" (Columbia)

As became the case with Damon Albarn, the Shins' songwriter James Mercer's little side-project may come to eclipse his original outlet – and as with Gorillaz, Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton plays an important role in effecting the change of focus.

On Broken Bells' 2010 debut, Burton's dance/electro leanings were largely set aside in favour of a proper "band" sound featuring his own drums and keyboards alongside Mercer's voice and guitar. But as the title suggests, those inclinations are restored on *After the Disco*, with the opener "Perfect World" effectively re-creating the sound of Factory Records circa 1981: the pattering sequencers and sleek-bleak synth lines recall OMD and early New Order, with Mercer doing a decent impression of Barney Sumner's wan-but-knowing vocal style. Blessed with an infernally catchy hook, it's the best thing they've done.

"Holding on for Life" extends the disco theme through Mercer's Bee Gee-esque falsetto refrain, delivered here over a creepy theremin whine. While "After the Disco" itself plays a wild card with one of Mercer's characteristic oblique melodies, its unexpected left-turns revealing endless further possibilities. The lyrical theme – "After the disco, all of the shine just faded away" – serves as a motif for the album as a whole, with songs like "Control", "The Remains of Rock and Roll" and "Leave It Alone" all confronting disillusion and disappointment of some form.

The latter is the kind of contemplative number that others might treat as a standard Americana folk-blues, but here is transformed by Burton's keyboard washes and string-synth, strangely congruent with the gospelly choral hook.

Ironically, given its disillusioned tone, *After the Disco* offers welcome confirmation of the vast and varied terrain available to pop and rock when it dares stray away from the mainstream or merely contemporary.

Download: A Perfect World; After the Disco; Holding on for Life; Leave It Alone

Bombay Bicycle Club "So Long, See You Tomorrow" (Island)

Continuing to change direction with each album, Bombay Bicycle Club shift into a sort of sample-pop/world music crossover with the diffidently different *So Long, See You*

Tomorrow. "Overdone" and "Feel" both sound as if built from loops of Bollywood string samples, the latter going transglobal by blending in a samba shuffle; and the tabla loop underpinning "Luna" is echoed by a lovely marimba line. But for all their openness, there's something underwhelming about the album. The vocals are nicely layered but unengaging, and the overall tone is soft, subtle and soothing, but rather colourless, with a lack of dynamism perhaps reflecting the absence of an outside producer. It sounds as if it's designed to slip down as smoothly as possible, but accordingly, each song slips too readily from the memory.

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Download: Overdone; Luna; Feel

Robin McKelle & The Flytones "Heart of Memphis" (OKeh)

Primarily known for her jazz work, Robin McKelle sticks to the trusted virtues of Memphis soul on this latest album. She eschews soul-diva vocal gymnastics in favour of terse, no-nonsense inflections. As she sings in "Easier That Way", "Forget all this high fidelity, I like my records old and worn out", an indication of the values at work here. There's a swampy Muscle Shoals strut to the opener "About to Be Your Baby", with horns punctuating its progress in classic Willie Mitchell manner; elsewhere, the slow-burn smouldering dynamic of "Forgetting You" recalls Otis Redding's arrangement style, while an assertive version of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" draws equally from Nina Simone and Eric Burdon. A secret soul classic in the making.

Download: About to Be Your Baby; Forgetting You; Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood; Good Time

Sarah Jarosz "Build Me Up from Bones" (Sugar Hill)

With Build Me Up from Bones, Sarah Jarosz restores an earthy inventiveness to folk music – despite the violin and cello of her touring bandmates Alex Hargreaves and Nathaniel Smith tweaking the bluegrass settings with classical flavours that reflect the singer's conservatory training. Smith's pizzicato cello is the sole accompaniment on Dylan's "Simple Twist of Fate", adding another twist which, like the trio's jazzy interpretation of Joanna Newsom's "The Book of Right-On", re-casts the song anew. Elsewhere, the stellar likes of Jerry Douglas, Chris Thile and Darrell Scott bring polish to several songs, the nimble threads of banjo, mandolin, violin and guitar illuminating the aesthetic musings of songs like "Fuel the Fire", "Dark Road" and "Rearrange the Art".

Download: Fuel the Fire; Over the Edge; Rearrange the Art; Simple Twist of Fate

Maximo Park "Too Much Information" (Daylighting)

Singer Paul Smith's respect for books and reading continues on Too Much Information, with one song ("Her Name Was Audre") celebrating the black poetess/librarian Audre Lorde, and another ("I Recognise the Light") reflecting upon how reading helps you travel the world in your head, bringing you closer to places you've never been. A third, "Lydia, the Ink Will Never Dry", is a tribute to the author Lydia Davis. But the music struggles to match the lyrical focus, sounding piecemeal and haphazard. "Brain Cells" is routine electropop, "My Bloody Mind" has the brittle, angular manner of old-school new-wave, while "Lydia..." is built around Johnny Marr-style ringing arpeggios – the most appealing stratagem here, but not enough to outweigh the passages of nondescript filler.

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Download: Lydia, the Ink Will Never Dry; I Recognise the Light

Seth Lakeman "Word of Mouth" (Cooking Vinyl)

Seth Lakeman new album is dominated by the past, through celebrations or commemorations of old ways, occupations and disasters. "The Wanderer" toasts travellers following the "crucial common ways, these tracks of your domain", a theme taken up with

furious fiddle and drum in the Dartmoor-set "The Courier" and "The Ranger". Elsewhere, the honest toil of stevedores and railwaymen is celebrated in "Another Long Night" and "Last Rider" respectively, while maritime disasters (Titanic and Slapton Sands) are commemorated in "The Saddest Crowd" and "Tiger". But for all evident passion of his playing and singing, the most natural emotional impact here is wielded by the traditional song "Portrait of My Wife" – an affirmation of the power of old ways, but perhaps not in the way he'd prefer.

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Download: Portrait of My Wife; The Wanderer; The Courier