



## DARLINGSIDE - *BIRDS SAY*

“Pesticide is used to kill pests. Fratricide is when you kill your brother,” explains Darlingside’s Dave Senft. “A former teacher of ours used to say ‘kill your darlings,’ which is to say, if you fall in love with something you’ve written you should cross it out. We like that idea and we thought a good name for it might be ‘darlingcide’, but we changed the ‘c’ to an ‘s’ because we’re not super into death.” The naming of the band reflects the arch humor, cryptic wordplay, and playful banter that the four close friends share on and off stage—but the music Darlingside plays is serious, cinematic, and deeply moving.

On *Birds Say*, the Massachusetts-based quartet’s wide-open arrangements are marked by the skillful vocal interplay of the four singers. When bassist Dave Senft, guitarist and banjo player Don Mitchell, classical violinist and folk mandolinist Auyon Mukharji, and cellist and guitar picker Harris Paseltiner gather around a single microphone and let their richly-textured voices loose, they splash their melodies with a sunny melancholy that brings their lyrics to vibrant life. Subtle musical shadings take cues from 60s folk, chamber pop, bluegrass, classical music, and modern indie rock, while aching harmonies are complemented by tones from the harmonium, frailing banjo, 12-string electric guitar, Wurlitzer, auto-chord organ, and grand piano. The result is a collection of quietly passionate songs that defy easy categorization.

“Each song and set of lyrics are created by all of us together, a sort of ‘group stream-of-consciousness,’” Harris says. “So we moved away from a single lead vocalist and started gravitating towards singing in unison, passing the melody around, or harmonizing in four parts through an entire song.” Live and on record, they present a unified voice by clustering around a single condenser microphone and blending their voices in the room before they hit the mic.

Darlingside assembled the songs that make up *Birds Say* over the past three years in their kitchens and living rooms, on cabin retreats, and while visiting each other’s childhood homes. They recorded at Dimension Sound Studios in Boston with engineer and co-producer Dan Cardinal during the city’s snowiest month in history, the streets empty due to travel bans.

Sparse notes from banjo, acoustic guitar, violin and grand piano punctuate the solemn “White Horses,” in keeping with the song’s themes of haunting nostalgia and bleak winter inertia. “Looking for a trace of our orchard underground / Growing in the basements beneath a brand new town,” Harris sings delicately while the others support him with high, mournful harmonies. Auyon, Dave, and Harris sing in unison to begin “The God of Loss,” a song that laments the inevitable clash of the narrator’s familial, cultural, and romantic loyalties. Auyon’s somber fiddle and the unadorned arrangement recall the isolated wail of an old Appalachian folk song, transplanted into a bed of churning guitars. “Harrison Ford” rides lightheartedly on an echoing hand percussion loop, goosed along by Don’s chattering banjo as he sings a lyric full of complex internal rhymes in a style that’s part vocalese, part sideshow spiel. The ensemble supplies bursts of fractured harmonies that mirror the action of the swordfight the speaker is having with a man who may, or may not, be Harrison Ford.

The title track “Birds Say” is a vocal tour de force, with layered nylon-string guitars, violin, and cello underpinning 12 multi-tracked voices that fill the sonic space with rich overtones and intertwining harmonies as they muse on the mysteries of communication and interconnection.

Brittle synthesizer-like sounds from Auyon's mandolin seamlessly mesh with acoustic and 12-string Danelectro guitars for the folk rock groove of "Go Back." The arresting a cappella intro features all four voices lifted in harmonies that recall CSNY (Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young). The propulsive music shifts under the vocalists, fervent as they attempt to untie the knots that connect past and future.

"We wrote this record thinking about our childhoods, our transition into adulthood together, and the complexities of life that we all have to grapple with now," Don says. Lyrically and musically, the band will follow a song wherever it takes them. "We don't really think about genre," Auyon observes. "We don't see any limits except 'no jazz,' because none of us know how to play it." And yet the band's close harmonies and carefully crafted arrangements do occasionally spill into loose free-form outros, surreal dream spaces, and textural experimentation. "We started dipping into some psychedelic sounds with Dan," says Harris, "re-amping our group vocals through a rotating organ speaker to give them a melting, wavering Doppler effect, or pushing an instrument through an Echoplex tape delay, which can make an acoustic guitar sound like a spaceship taking off." Amid unexpected soundscapes, the songs remain familiar, looking backward and forward at the same time.

The members of Darlingside met at Williams College in western Massachusetts. "Auyon and I were paired as freshman year roommates," Dave recalls. "We fought often, but we spent so much time together that we very quickly became like brothers." They joined a singing group with Don, and Harris joined the same group two years later. From there, the four bonded over a shared interest in songwriting, despite a diversity of musical backgrounds and performance styles including chamber music, choral singing, Celtic session playing, and street busking. As soon as Harris, the youngest, graduated, the friends moved into a house on the Connecticut River in Hadley, MA. "We had 'family dinners' almost every night," says Dave, "rotating cooking for one another, and we spent a lot of our free time out on a dilapidated houseboat that we called the 'Shack Raft.'"

Darlingside first toured as a five-piece indie rock band with drums, but finding the right delicate balance of voices and instruments was a challenge early on. Then, in 2013, the band parted ways with their long-time friend and drummer. "In our first few shows without Sam, we felt naked," says Auyon. Listening to the current quartet, you can hear fingers on strings, breathing in the singing, squeaks and pumps from a harmonium. The band now performs the songs the same way they practice and write them—seeing them live is like sitting in their living room. There are still vestiges of the rock format: electric guitar fuzz and ambient feedback creep into otherwise acoustic arrangements. But in the new format, voices and melody have shifted to the forefront—a shift that has become important to the band. Harris explains, "we try to write songs that exist out of the context we set them into, songs that can just be sung."

After six years of playing together and a decade-plus of knowing each other, the band's collaborative process has evolved side by side with their friendships. "We've become intimate with each other's childhoods, families, fears, goals, insecurities and body odors," Auyon notes. "That kind of closeness is typically limited to romantic relationships. It's gotten to the point where we often mistake each other's stories and memories for our own." *Birds Say* is a patchwork of the artistic and personal visions of four equal songwriters—a mashup of their individual and collective experiences and dreams. "The process is so entangled," Don says, "I sometimes can't remember what I wrote, or what anyone else wrote. We don't consider a song finished until we're all satisfied with it. It may not be the fastest process, but we know that when we all agree on something, it'll sound like us."

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