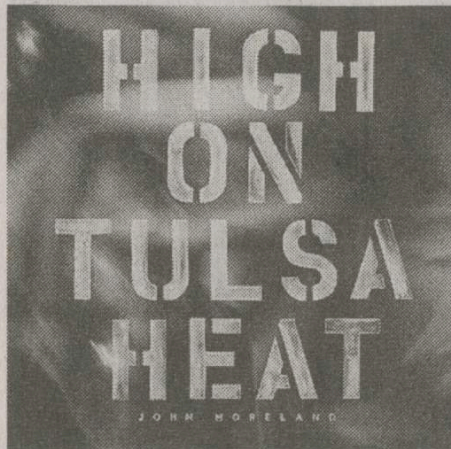


# The New York Times

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## New Music



### John Moreland

*“High on Tulsa Heat”*  
(Old Omens/Thirty Tigers)

The Oklahoma folk singer John Moreland has a beautifully abraded voice, full of potholes and gravel. Rarely does he wield it with power — instead, his soft hallow scrape is marked by flexibility and candor. At the beginning of “Cherokee,” one of the many fine songs on “High on Tulsa Heat,” his third full-length solo album, he sings, “I guess I’ve got a taste for poison/ I’ve given up on ever being well,” and it sounds as if he’s singing from the sickbed somewhere, with no visitors on the horizon.

Before he was working the shadowy corners of folk-country, Mr. Moreland played in metal-core and hardcore bands. The lasting effect of that is perhaps in his music’s admirable lack of sentimentality. It’s not that he does-

n’t feel deeply — he certainly does — but he’s no passive canvas.

At its best, “High on Tulsa Heat” is starkly elegant, addressing sadness with clarity and directness. Mr. Moreland writes with a world-weary air — on “Hang Me in the Tulsa County Stars,” he groans, “Babe I know this world will have the wolves outside your door/Make you leave all that you love to fight a war/ And never tell you what you’re dying for.”

Since his 2013 album “In the Throes,” Mr. Moreland has chosen to let the light in, at least musically. That album was severe and isolated; here, he concedes ever so slightly to brighter arrangements peppered with dobro and pedal steel and female back-up vocals. But they’re just honey smoothing the ride for the bitter pills. “I’m the kind of love it hurts to look at,” Mr. Moreland sings on “You Don’t Care for Me Enough to Cry.” And he keeps returning to speaking about love while using a metaphor of illness. On “White Flag,” the album’s prettiest song, he’s virtually an invalid:

*I wanna learn a new sickness  
and dance around forgiveness  
Darling, won't you be my ache  
to please?  
Or are you bundled up in bar  
light  
clinging to a prettier disease?*

JON CARAMANICA