



Darlingside - *Extralife*

The word “extraordinary” is defined as something beyond, amazing, or incredible. The word “extralife” doesn’t exist. But in the world of Darlingside—another previously non-existent word—it’s all about invention, expansion, and elevating everything into the realm of the extraordinary both conceptually and through musical performance.

The band’s new album *Extralife* intensifies the journey begun on its critically acclaimed 2015 album *Birds Say*. On that project, Darlingside’s quartet of bassist Dave Senft, guitarist/banjoist Don Mitchell, violinist/mandolinist Auyon Mukharji, and cellist/guitarist Harris Paseltiner fused assertions (“Go Back”), assumptions (“God Of Loss”), predictions (“The Ancestor”), projections (“Do You Ever Live?”) and reflections (“White Horses”). “We put our four heads together and created this collective consciousness about bits and pieces from our past and how we saw the world based upon reminiscences,” explains Paseltiner about that sojourn. It having been the Massachusetts group’s second full-length outing, *Birds Say* mastered a musical and lyrical path that led to the more challenging territory explored on *Extralife*. Mukharji describes the “*Extralife*” concept as “...a life beyond where we are now, whether that’s a brand new thing, a rebirth, or just a new version of ourselves as we move forward.” So by abandoning *Birds Say*’s nostalgia and its tales of “what once was,” Darlingside created its polar opposite with *Extralife*, the new album exploring “what is now” and “what might be” simultaneously in the brave new world.

“A lot of the album has to do with the present and the future,” Mukharji reveals, “that future being a completely unknown quantity and the present being a new and bizarre place to be living in. I think we’re grappling with a number of aspects of reality we had not expected.” That reality, surviving a dystopian landscape, constructs the new album, the band killing many of its prior darlings (the name Darlingside being a reference to non-attachment) in the process. Their *Birds Say*, wide-eyed innocence is now bloodshot for the better. As the title track “Extralife” informs in four-part harmony, “It’s over now / The flag is sunk / The world has flattened out,” it loosely sets the new album’s premise. However, the recording also delivers hope through Beach Boys-inspired vocals that contrast with lyrics such as “The fiery flower beds above / Mushroom clouds reset the sky.” “Eschaton” uses a similar formula, this time immersing its Waterworld imagery in fun, fluid synthesizer runs, concluding with the rally, “No matter what we’ve been / We are the upshot now.” Its axis-flipped, Escher-mimicking lyrics sketch a variation on the End Times that suggests it’s actually preventable. Even the “Taps”-inspired trumpet mourn and harmonica cries of “Hold Your Head Up High” are held at bay by the uplifting, anthemic chorus chants of the song title’s message.

As seen throughout the above, *Extralife* is not shy about employing metaphysics to prove its flexible theses. Perhaps the most blatant example would be in “Futures.” Despite despondent references to “futureforests in the sea,” “bikini snow,” (a historical nickname for nuclear fallout) and even the Thermocene Epoch, we’re encouraged through time-traveling radio transmissions that “It’s not ever too late,” undeniable when empowered by those powerful four-part harmonies. Even the song’s tiny interpolation of The Beatles’ “I’ve Just Seen A Face”, “Falling, yes I’m

falling, and she keeps calling me back again,” is a reassurance that, yes, as even The Fab Four suggested, we will find our way back. And if doom and gloom *is* reversible, perhaps whatever darling is emerging on “Indian Orchard Road” can be killed or contained by the sheer beauty of a Darlingside musical assault.

Although Darlingside’s signature superpower is considered to be their vocal prowess, it perhaps can overwhelm their presentations’ subtleties, both live and in the studio. After all, the mind gravitates to that which is charming, and their harmonies could seduce the rings off Saturn. But *Extralife* is the first Frankensteining—as the band puts it—by the group’s four equal-status members. Each one now equally contributes to something way bigger than his individual part. Equal contributions of vocals, lyrical altruism and wisdom, and effortless musicianship are what empower today’s Darlingside and animate *Extralife*’s twelve reality-benders.

As evidenced in their new recordings, these young turks jettison preconceived notions and hardwired life lessons with the grace of choirboys. This time around, there’s no patience for a lengthy, lighthearted song such as *Birds Say*’s “Harrison Ford” when a cut-to-the-chase commentary on the “American dark horse” using a short but pathos-rich “Rita Hayworth” as its vehicle will suffice. Also, instead of relying purely on its very capable, musical fraternity of core members, they even eliminate their Darlingside darlings by expanding its Americana with surprising instrumentation such as the aforementioned trumpet, plus synthesizers, echo-chambered flutes, and more. Of the gifts and weapons left by these honorary Darlingsidians, Mukharji informs, “It very much feels like a big, communal family that’s growing together. That’s a very exciting thing.” And once described as boyishly cryptic, their innocent, poetic lyrics also were felled on the field. On *Extralife*, lyrics must serve as standalone poetry, cautionary tales, and extended musical backdrops via phonetics with no clear boundaries.

So considering all of the above, what exactly *is* “*Extralife*?” “The idea of the ‘extra life’ in a video game is another chance or another path, and the ability to continue,” reveals Pasetliner. “We read an article about Mario Brothers and the development of Nintendo in *The Economist*. With that first track on the album, Auyon had been conducting a lyrics experiment where he was writing from the viewpoint of Mario stuck in a video game. We then ended up taking our songs beyond the confines of that video game experiment, identifying with some of its themes like either feeling stuck in a certain dimension and having a desire to break into the next one or what it means to break beyond the sphere we are stuck in—the present. The album goes through a series of songs that deal with that.”

As “Best Of The Best Of Times” posits, “I wonder whether our days are unnumbered,” if we’re truly heading towards Game Over. Neither *Extralife* nor its creators have any solutions. On the other hand, “Orion” offers some guidance as to preventing the “what is now” from cementing the “what might be” explored across this brave new album: “The beach is just a line in the sand / The tide is in the palm of your hand / It’s looking like the start or the end / Either way ahead is around the bend.” Perhaps by moving *beyond* our preconceptions—going *Extralife*—we can create an *amazing* future by steering this world towards something *incredible*. That all makes up the definition of *extraordinary*.

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