



'Extralife' is the new album by Darlingside.

MUSIC REVIEW | By Jim Fusilli

Folk Meets A Cappella

DARLINGSIDE'S THIRD full-length album, "Extralife" (More Doug), is characterized by exceptional vocal harmonies in chamber-folk settings. Though the quartet's honeyed voices are often compared with those of the Beach Boys, the Byrds, Grizzly Bear or Fleet Foxes, that assessment misses the mark.

Darlingside's primary influences as vocalists aren't from rock and pop, but from the world of a cappella choral groups. Harris Pasetliner, Ayoun Mukharji, Don Mitchell and Dave Senft met as members of the Williams College Octet, originally formed in 1940, whose repertoire was traditional a cappella group fare of folk and American Songbook standards with an occasional modern pop tune in the mix. Thus, on its gutsy, independent path, Darlingside retains a fondness for rounded tones, harmonic motion and unison doubling, and the quartet supports its vocalizing with a mix of acoustic instruments that can span classical and folk music. Mr. Senft plays bass, Mr. Mitchell guitar and banjo, Mr. Mukharji violin and mandolin, and Mr. Pasetliner cello and guitar. On "Extralife," guests include Jonathan Dely on trumpet and flugelhorn, Alec Spiegelman on clarinet and flute, and Ariel Bernstein on percussion, all of whom enrich the music in just-right amounts.

On "Extralife," out Friday, the voices dominate, but they never overwhelm the surprising arrangements or what Mr. Mukharji referred to as the "instrumental bed" when he, Mr. Pasetliner and I met for coffee here two weeks ago. "Singularity" calls bluegrass to mind with its acoustic guitars, banjo and violin—until Mr. Dely's trumpet enters briefly and, as if re-energized, the voices soar. "Fu-

tures" charges forward on darting guitars and dancing bass tones until unexpected interludes steer the song in other directions. The most experimental piece on the album, "Eschaton," rides in on burbling sounds that ebb and flow, causing a sort of pleasing chaos.

Meanwhile, the vocals float on undistracted. They are particularly appealing in the upper register, largely because they minimize falsetto, thus achieving what Mr. Pasetliner called "a trumpet-like" sonority. The quartet prefers to gather around a single microphone to sing. In "Singularity" and "Old Friend," the four vocalists each sang three different parts, thus creating a 12-voice choir. Fans of '60s rock may recall that the Beatles used the triple-tracked technique in "Because" on "Abbey Road."

Darlingside knows well the gamut of chamber folk. Presentations range from the unencumbered finger-picked guitar and a harmonica that form the supple spine of "Hold Your Head Up High," to the clacking percussion and plucked violin strings that usher in "The Rabbit and the Pointed Gun," to the experimentalism of "Eschaton" and "Orion," which straddle classical music and progressive bluegrass. With the tuning of the folk guitars, the thrilling "Old Friend" brings to mind the music of Nick Drake, though Drake never featured such lush vocal harmonies.

The reference to Drake by Darlingside suggests influences: Whether deliberately or not,

several of the tracks on "Extralife" are kin to the late '60s and early '70s English folk revival of Sandy Denny, Fairport Convention, John Martyn and others. Darlingside's pastoral "Lindisfarne" features choral singing, chiming guitars and mandolins, and a lovely orchestral interlude that is reminiscent of the music of the harmony-rich '70s British folk-rock group of the same name. Mr. Pasetliner said he'd never heard of Lindisfarne and that an early iteration of the Darlingside composition was a loungy pop tune.

As the quartet sings together, so too does it compose its songs. If one member brings in a number, it is very likely to morph into something quite different. "It's like a game of telephone," said Mr. Pasetliner. "It will come back to you in a demented form. I may hear an Icelandic choir and 18 violins, but as we develop it, it begins to sound more like us." He added that the group adheres to its motto: "That's a bad idea. Let's try it." Thus, nothing is too far-fetched to be considered and improved. The band's name is a play on the invented term "darlingcide," created when an instructor at Williams reminded them that artists must be willing to kill their darlings; that is, eliminate a favored part that doesn't serve the overall work.

With "Extralife," Darlingside leaps ahead of where it had been on earlier works like its 2015 album, "Birds Say." The voices remain as

strong as ever while the arrangements are more adventurous, blurring the lines between genres and giving the group access to several audiences. When I mentioned to Messrs. Mukharji and Pasetliner that I couldn't quite figure out where they fit in the contemporary rock-and-pop landscape, they conceded, in unison, that they couldn't either. Neither musician seemed particularly troubled by the thought.

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