

Darlingside – *Everything Is Alive*

Everything Is Alive, Darlingside’s fourth LP, marks a subtle but remarkable departure for the Boston-based quartet NPR once described as “exquisitely arranged, literary minded, baroque folk-pop.” While the album retains much of the lushness and sophistication of *Extralife* (2018) and *Fish Pond Fish* (2020), the band’s latest work decisively exposes and differentiates the individual voices of the four songwriters—a daring reinvention for a group known for ubiquitous vocal harmonies. Grappling with change both personal and universal, with quandaries domestic and existential, *Everything Is Alive* is an album about loss and the struggle for a semblance of redemption.

Comprised of Don Mitchell, Auyon Mukharji, Harris Paseltiner and David Senft, four likeminded multi-instrumentalists who first met at Williams College in 2009, Darlingside’s career has been defined by the elegance of their compositions and the unity of their four voices. Their talent for harmony and melodic world-building is part of what garnered praise from outlets like *NPR*, *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker*, and what has created demand worldwide for their extraordinary live performances. Becoming beautifully *unindividualized* has, in other words, worked very well for Darlingside in the past. With a vigor and discipline more common to graduate-level writing workshops than to indie rock, Darlingside has, over the years, experimented with all manners of idiosyncratic methods for elevating and upholding a truly democratic process of songwriting—processes that include multiple rounds of group writing and recording exercises—all with the aim of escaping the trap that bands with multiple songwriters often fall into: ego-driven infighting and artistic incoherence.

On *Everything Is Alive*, then, Darlingside is taking a risk. Nudged by the limitations created by pandemic isolation, as well as through other more voluntary catalysts, the album, which was produced and recorded by the band and mixed by Tucker Martine (My Morning Jacket, Sufjan Stevens, Iron and Wine), foregrounds in a sustained and heretofore untried way the individual voices of each member. Where once the harmonies formed a hard-won sonic unification, *Everything Is Alive* showcases the four singers as they alternate (more or less) song for song, an approach that rewards listeners with a sense of personal ownership and, therefore, a new degree of intimacy and nuance.

Don’t misunderstand: *Everything Is Alive* is still very much a collaborative effort—many of the same meticulous rituals and exercises went into this effort as went into *Extralife* and *Fish Pond Fish*. The difference here is that the band has given itself permission to plumb new depths, to add extra dimension to what was already a highly dialed-in aesthetic. And the results are compelling, not only due to the intimacy itself, but for the way such intimacy is counterpointed or juxtaposed against Darlingside’s trademark lushness. Present still are the beds of enveloping harmonies, as in the stunning (mostly) a cappella “How Long Again.” Retained also are the textured polyrhythms, the infectious body percussion, a triumphant horn section to bolster the earworm chorus of “Baking Soda” and a sobering cello quartet to elevate the heartbreak of “Lose The Keys.” The difference is that on *Everything Is Alive* these moments have been set against quieter, and thus contrasting, depths of solitude and vulnerability.

In this way, *Everything Is Alive*, which was begun in 2021, seems a continuation of 2020’s *Fish Pond Fish*. A sequel, perhaps; the second half of a COVID double album. Where *Fish Pond Fish* built its lush sonic landscape around vibrant images of woolgathering, fruit picking and returning home, *Everything Is*

Alive confronts the multitude of challenges that arise when “home at last” becomes “when, dear god, will I be free of this stasis and grief?” *Lose the keys, the marbles, lose a parent/lose the count, lose the plot/it’s the losing that counts/is it not* sings Mitchell on “Lose the Keys.” Elsewhere one encounters images of walking in circles, of domestic frustration, and of unabashedly falling apart, all of which work together as an acknowledgment of a despair that must be confronted before redemption can be made possible. “Am I almost out of the dark?” asks Senft on “Can’t Help Falling Apart”—a track that, it turns out, helped Senft arrive at the realization that he could not continue as a touring member of the band.

In other places on the album, such as opening track “Green Light,” a propensity for retreating into the self is refuted by an attempt to discern the small but tangible glory of the world before us. The song meditates on the humble beauty contained within things as (seemingly) drab as sidewalks and concrete and rust. Built on an iPhone memo of a strumming mandocello, “Green Light” is notable for another reason: in its mantra-like worldliness it is unlike anything Darlingside has done before. Reminiscent of George Harrison circa “Within You Without You,” the track, itself a creative leap, signals the heretofore untrod territory the album at large goes on to explore.

Vivid images and striking turns of phrase abound on *Everything Is Alive*. Expectations are commonly inverted or exploded—exploded curiously, with nuance, but exploded no less—as in these lines from “All The Lights In The City”: *maybe working is what makes us live, or maybe it’s living/sky is always hanging blue above the cloud/but the path of no resistance will wear you out*. On “Sea Dogs,” the track that contains the album’s title, Pasetiner sings over an effervescent dreamscape: *I can’t wake up all the time/or even half the time or/even be on time*. Such lines capture the disorientation and desperation that pervade this album. And yet, later in the same song, come the lines which align poignantly with the song’s dreamy sonic context: *when up in the clouds are sea dogs/and kites and big white basketballs/the backyard is thickening/ how is it everything/ everything is alive/alive, alive*. “Sea Dogs” is both the album’s thesis and a bridge to *Fish Pond Fish*, modifying that album’s motifs about nature as a reflection of the self to ask whether nature is not also a means of escaping or transcending the confines of selfhood altogether.

It’s a rare thing and becoming rarer by the day: a group of musicians with that emulsifying magic to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. And to see Darlingside perform live is to confirm this special chemistry. With the release of *Everything Is Alive* the band will, for the first time, take to the road without Dave Senft. Instead of filling his spot directly, the band has wisely chosen to honor the special chemistry of the foursome by letting those arrangements live on the recordings without obligation to faithfully recreate them onstage. While Dave remains a contributing member of the band, on tour Darlingside will perform in a completely different configuration altogether—a configuration that will, at times, include the album’s drummer Ben Burns, singer Molly Parden, and others—proving again how the group can adroitly rearrange themselves for the breaking of a new and different day.