

The New Year

by Howard Wyman



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(Touch and Go, 2008)

The brothers Kadane breathe life into the lifeless. Or is it the other way around? Either way, their matter-of-fact mastery of patient, grounded rock has been a lifeline for anyone in the past 17 years mired by both the inadvertent mantra of "don't get excited" and a simultaneous search for catharsis. Everything about the band makes sense; their slow and distant process of collaboration, the deliberate pace of the music itself, and the sentiments expressed within.

There's a narrative to *The New Year* that unfolds through its frank lyrics and the order of its songs, a seemingly consistent situation around which the album's sentiments are oriented. An attempt at reconciliation, an acknowledgement of lost time, a resignation to the lesser of two inevitable disappointments, and the inward observations that carry on from one point to the next. The Kadanes may indulge their dourness a little more than most of us care to admit about ourselves, yet they also do it more accurately, with an even temper and occasional stoic humor. Songs take to heart the singer's reluctant compliance with needs dictated by our needs as social animals whether we like it or not, while also anticipating how unfulfilling the outcome is bound to be. "We both have a need for things we don't need, like belief, and relief, and pleasure, and grief," Kadane sings in his slightly weary, everyman voice in the song "MMV"—a brilliant, fundamental outlook that might as well underscore their entire inspiration. It's not easy evoking passion while coolly questioning its function, yet this is the aqua regia the New Year distills for us, dispersing the big deal we're expected to make of our emotions while sublimating it only through their meditatively escalating compositions.

It's been four years since the last New Year album, which isn't so long considering that two members live in New York, two in Texas, and the drummer's in Boston. Bridging the 1500 miles between central songwriters Bubba and Matt Kadane takes time, even in this day and age. Yet collaborating in this way seems to serve them well. A little isolation, even if only theoretical, could only stoke the kind of downcast embers glowing wryly in the work of the New Year. It allows time for each member's other projects, as well as for the unhurried cultivation of their hallmark guitar interplay, which presumably plays out best when left with private time for deliberation, like correspondence chess. Naturally, if their earlier days made anything clear, it's that these two can't be rushed, even if their tempos do grow slightly perkier over time. As they gravitate further from their Bedhead molasses days (yet never uncomfortably or unrecognizably so), the initial bit of bounce that essentially delineated the difference between the two bands has continued its subtle trend on their self-titled latest. "X Off Days" opens with surprisingly bright riffs and energetic tempo, for example, leading right up to its somewhat incongruously frustrated first line, "I can't remember why it felt so good..." At the same time, the New Year also spends a surprising amount of time away from the guitar altogether, shifting its orientation frequently to the piano, which turns out to be a warm and seamless evolution.

In the end, it's not really as glum as all that. As any pessimist might say, it's more like emotional realism, and with music as great as this, it's much