

Oren Bloedow and Jennifer Charles of Elysian Fields give the scoop on their latest release *For House Cats And Sea Fans*

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Elysian Fields came out of New York's legendary Knitting Factory, a hotbed of musical exploration and genre mixing and a hub of the vibrant 1990s downtown scene. Drawn together by a mutual love of The Beatles, Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, Iggy Pop, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Captain Beefheart, Ravi Shankar, Frédéric Chopin and Olivier Messiaen, founders Jennifer Charles and Oren Bloedow had traveled parallel paths in Washington, D.C. and New York until a scholarship to New York University's drama department drew Jennifer to New York. Both had been to see the Bad Brains and Lounge Lizards (for whom Oren would play bass in the early '90s), both worshiped Woody Allen and Fellini, both went to alternative high schools and both had become independent at an early age.

Echoes of all of these artists can be heard on Elysian Fields records, starting in 1996 with the Radioactive/Universal releases *Elysian Fields* and *Bleed Your Cedar*, and continuing through their Jetset, Play it Again Sam, Naive, Diluvian and Vicious Circle releases. Other influences crept in over the albums, however, as Oren's writing palette expanded to include piano and as both of their folk/world music collections grew. But their sound, as Nick Kent wrote, is "still unique — as sensual as a sleepwalker's wet dream," and influences are synthesized smoothly into their private language. For almost two decades they have been quietly putting out spellbinding records.

Their newest collection, and ninth release *For House Cats And Sea Fans* is a lush musical journey, spanning emotion and genre, at times paying tribute to the no wave they both cut their teeth on. John Lurie made the cover painting. We asked the enigmatic duo to speak about their latest collection.

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What's the title all about — *For House Cats And Sea Fans*?

JC: I was imagining my ideal audience.

"Come Down From The Ceiling"

OB: About somebody who is losing touch with reality... "you're leaving me no choice / you're just a murmur inside the white void." These lines reflect the resignation that you can't control people. You have to let them be. One of the special things about it is it's got a nice long phrase that you can get lost in, and it has a really rich sheen to it. Mark Plati's mix is really light and fluffy, and there's a lot of gorgeous surfaces in it... Thomas Bartlett's keyboards, me and Ed Pastorini both harmonizing with Jennifer's beautiful vocal... one of our Beatlesque numbers.



"Alms For Your Love"

JC: In my mind it was always a madrigal, a medieval poem of sorts. Came to me while driving upstate, so I guess that madrigal group I was in in high school made some kind of impression on me. It was pretty square, but I dug that the subjects were often tragic and love-fueled. Madrigal comes from the Latin "of the womb," so that's pretty hot. "Alms..." is about when you want love so desperately, you'll take any kind of crumb you can get.

"Next Year In Jerusalem"

JC: Also written while driving upstate. I find driving meditative. Same with bicycle riding, both places where you can open yourself to a blank canvas with a constant underlying motion, where songs can then present themselves. "Next Year In Jerusalem" is about a tomorrow where things will be different, and having a place that encapsulates and symbolizes that.

OB: Jennifer brought me the lyric and to me it was mostly about the fortunes of the band, which is an ongoing lyrical theme of hers. Jeff Buckley was very much on my mind in creating the music to go with her singing, and we had the great Matt Johnson (of Buckley's Grace) in the studio with us, and he did a searing drum performance for us, which really put over the sweep and grandeur of the song.

"She Gets Down"

OB: "She Gets Down" might be the song that comes closest to no wave — not least because it features guest artist James Chance on saxophone. And while it's not as raw-edged as *No New York*, for Lydia Lunch fans it might bring to mind her great jazz record *Queen Of Siam*.

JC: Somewhat of a cheeky portrait of my growing up. The kind of risqué style that drove me is perfectly encapsulated in James's sax work on the track.

And were you a Contortions fan?

OB: Oh yeah. Huge Contortions fan. I learned to play bass by playing along with the *Buy The Contortions*.

And “Channeling.” What is that?

JC: A psychedelic love song. I believe in energy, telepathic communication, and trance. Trusting the universe to take you to the right place. Charged particles and all that jazz.

What about “Madeleine?”

OB: “Madeleine” is by Ed Pastorini, and it’s another tune that we took a kind of Beatlesque recording approach to — putting tea towels on Ben Perowsky’s drums and adding a beautiful cello arrangement by Chris Vatalaro and his wife Daisy. They live in London.

JC: Ed wrote this for a little girl he had met when she was visiting her sick sister in the hospital. There are certain songs that he writes that seem natural for me to sing, because I can get inside of it, and this was one.

“Escape From New York.”

JC: New York has changed tremendously since I’ve known it. A lot of what drew me to New York and what fascinated me about New York is a little toothless now. It came out of my ennui and frustration of what I see as the new, homogenized New York. But it’s not just New York. It’s this global problem — overdevelopment, corporate culture — that spawns a generic and artificial environment.

And Jim Thirlwell is on that one?

OB: Yeah, some scary samples. And also John Medeski played a Czech bass flute called the fujara on that track.

“This Project”

JC: The frustration of having a band, having this project for so long. You have to keep believing in it even when you’re hanging by a thread. You’ve got to take it seriously but it’s also with a lightness: “You’re gonna blow people’s minds.” There’s an irony there.

OB: Written in the van, on tour, by Jennifer, using her trademark strut. Whenever Jennifer writes a strut, I always try to give it confident-sounding, sexy, propulsive music to go with it. This music definitely references some of the early ‘80s influences that we’ve discussed, like Gang of Four and Polyrock — in the guitar playing, anyway — and there’s also a scalding five-string bass track by the jazz/funk bassist James Genus, who has been a member of the Elysian Fields family since our very first gig, in fact.

And what do you have to say about “Frank?”

OB: “Frank” to me references Brecht and Weill and Weimarer cabaret ballads, which is a stylistic touchstone for both of us. Beautiful acoustic overdubs from Rob Burger and Rob Jost. Really nice horn chart made by Jennifer and two guys named Frank. And it’s a story song. It’s a story that I can definitely relate to.

JC: Absolutely. And again there’s humor. With the drama. I think there’s always been a bit of the Camille in me.

How about “Wandering Moon.” Your vocals do an interesting thing together. Can you tell us anything about that?

OB: We overlapped a lot in the vocals, taking turns singing different lines in the chorus, and the lyric is based around a really touching poetical conceit that Jennifer seized upon when she learned that our moon — that the distinctive markings on our moon were caused by a collision with another satellite, or a wandering moon, at some time millions of years ago. And she saw in that a symbol for life and for what it is to be human, that we and everything in our environment are the products of terrible collisions, and we all bear those marks forever. That’s where the beauty and mystery lie.

Nice. And what about “Love Me Darling?”

OB: The most important musical ingredient is the Coltrane ingredient, the emotional release and the freedom of Coltrane, and the sternness of Coltrane’s modal language with McCoy Tyner’s low fifths and those powerful minor chords. That’s something that we just naturally come back to again and again, and there’s also a real journey that you take in the middle of the song with French and English horns and vibes and strings — another beautiful piece of work from the Vatalaros.

What do you think the song expresses and why is it the last song?

JC: When you know your own power, your own life force, purity, you want it to be recognized and reflected by someone else. I was also inspired by Cormac McCarthy for some of the lyric. In his book *The Road*, the father tells the son that he has to carry the fire. There are people out there who hold the fire of goodness within them. So I use that as a jumping off point for the chorus: “I hold the fire / mile after mile / so full of life I’m burning.”

Can you say anything about how the cover came about?

OB: Oh yeah — well, Jennifer came to me and told me the title for the record, and I said, “I think that’s a really fantastic title.” And at that time I was looking at a lot of John Lurie’s paintings online. He’s important to both of us, and though he’s not in music these days, he’s been making great paintings for years. And it occurred to me that this title sounded like one of his paintings, and I asked him if he’d be interested in painting it, and he said, “Well, it depends — what’s the title?” And I told him, and he said, “Good title. We’ll see.” And three days later, he had something for us. So that’s what you see.