

learn how to bend and not break as she continues along her path of transformation, and *Deeper Well* suggests that she's doing just that.

Matt Hoffman

Camera Obscura

Look to the East, Look to the West

MERGE



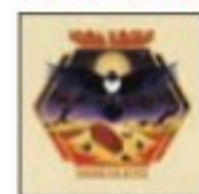
Eleven years after their last album, Glasgow indie-pop act **Camera Obscura** are swooning back onto the scene.

The world has changed dramatically since 2013, but, thankfully, Camera Obscura hasn't changed course. And their sixth LP, *Look to the East, Look to the West*, checks all of the boxes that originally made lovelorn fans fall for their music in the early aughts. If the phrase "indie darlings" were more judiciously applied to bands, then Camera Obscura would still make the cut—the Scottish act amassed fans for their unabashedly sweet, romantic daydream twee-pop music, all set adrift with frontwoman **Tracyanne Campbell**'s yearning lyrics and maudlin melodies. This is a band whose most beloved song is called "Lloyd, I'm Ready to be Heartbroken." With *Look to the East, Look to the West*, they haven't lost an ounce of their refined, elegantly orchestrated chops—these 11 tracks are majestically lovesick without ever feeling morose. "Sleepwalking" is easily among the band's most vulnerable songs to date, and represents the overall stripped-down feel of the album. There are no chirpy horn sections or swelling strings on *Look to the East*—in fact, "Sleepwalking" is mostly just Campbell and a piano until its outro. "Don't wake up in someone else's

arms/ I'm cringing right now at my weakness for your charms," she sings, and she sounds titanic and tiny all at once. Opener "Liberty Print" is more classic Camera Obscura, with a clipped drum beat, swirling organs and a sing-along melody that could qualify the tune to be a sad girl summer anthem. *Look to the East* is nostalgic, sure, but as long as there are young lovers yearning to be less lonesome, Camera Obscura will always sound up to date. *Justin Jacobs*

Mdou Mctar

Funeral for Justice MATADOR



On his new album, *Funeral for Justice*, **Mdou Mctar** comes out swinging and doesn't pull any

punches. Recorded after two years of touring the world on the heels of 2019's breakout *Afrique Victime*, *Funeral for Justice* captures the energy and intensity of Mctar's live performances: the guitars and drums are louder than ever, and the lyrics clearly articulate the Tuareg artist's strong and steadfast anti-colonial point of view. The title track bears both of these attributes, opening the album with loud, distinctly Western-sounding electric guitars behind lyrics firmly beseeching African leaders to take back their land from the West, a sentiment he reiterates in "Oh France." Much of the guitar work on the album highlights the blurry line between African music and American blues, and the result is explosive. Mctar is proud of his Tuareg heritage, encouraging his people in the classic desert blues sound of "Imouhar" to speak their native Tamasheq language, which

he fears will otherwise die out—an ambassador for his culture, Mctar is one of the few in his community who knows how to write the language. With rampant terrorist violence in Africa, Mctar's lyrics are politically charged. (In July 2023, after the album had been completed, Niger's democratic government was deposed in a coup.) He sings of the plight of the Tuareg in "Sousoume Tamachek," and their oppression in Niger, Mali, and Algeria, calling on the groups to unify in "Imajighen." If Mctar's own success provides him a platform to raise awareness around these issues, then *Funeral for Justice* undoubtedly will serve to bolster his ability to do so.

Matt Hoffman

Paul Reed Smith – Eightlock

Lions Roaring in Quicksand

STEELE



Most music fans, if they know the name **Paul Reed Smith** at all, are familiar with him via the product he has created: PRS Guitars. His machines are prized by the likes of Carlos Santana, John McLaughlin, John Mayer and other discerning players. But what many might not know is that Smith is also an accomplished guitarist himself and plays his own music regularly. He's released a couple of albums before, but *Lions Roaring in Quicksand* is the first by his band **Eightlock**—as in eight

EarCrystals

BY RICHARD GEHR

The search for other-world audio gems

Italian sunglass moves. "Try and orient yourself in the face of an empty void," wails avant-pop powerhouse **Simon Hanes** amid the Nietzschean overdrive of "Vindication of the Murder Hornets," before concluding: "Chances are the best you'll get is a new way to be annoyed." Hanes helms **Tredici Bacci**, an uncompromising and often hilariously askew big-group cannibalization of the brilliantly loony Italian soundtrack tradition. Soprano fireball **Sami Stevens** remains the secret weapon on their third album, *Brave New World* (Bandcamp), but the entire mostly conservatory-trained ensemble sounds brilliantly batty amid instrumentals such as "Smash Ennio" and the revolutionary Sondheim-ery of its title track.

Bible belting. Referencing biblical protection against the wrath of thine enemies whilst following the lamb unto living fountains, composer-bassoonist and all-around force of nature **Joy Guidry** transports spiritual jazz into brave new realms on their second album, *AMEN* (Whited Sepulchre). A pair of sonic pillars support brief yet beauteous celestial forays arranged for ambient electronics, Guidry's bassoon and a variety of other instruments. But some stunning gospel vocalizing over a noise-jazz rumble celebrates Max Roach's centenary on "Members Don't Get Weary," while "Angels," with its repeating testimony that "he never leaves me alone," celebrates life-choice vindication with a deep dive into Guidry's religious roots.

Creep show. Vancouver, B.C.'s **Empanadas Ilegales** may hail from Ecuador, Peru, Argentina and Colombia, but they're really all residents of Planet Cumbia. It's a spacy outer place where wah-wah guitars, squiggly synth, wailing sax and cumbia's insistent bass come for your children. On *Creepy Mambo: Rooftop Sessions* (We Are Time), the group disinters lost Peruvian cumbia gems such as Sonido Verde de Moyobamba's "La Danza del Vampiro" and Los Galax's "Lamento de un Galax," along with Los Benfords' chilling salsa escapade "Tobogán." Guitarist **Ricardo Perez**'s manic laughter punctuates the album's otherworldly dance vibes incessantly.

Meaty beats. *Ghana Special 2: Electronic Highlife & Afro Sounds in the Diaspora, 1980-93* (Soundway) focuses on "burger highlife," so called due to the many musicians who fled Ghana's repressive military regime and ended up in Hamburg, Germany. You'll surely be delighted by the variety of ferocious fusion found on this 95-minute collection, a good and greasy mashup of disco, funk, R&B, pop, modern highlife and traditional percussion—often enhanced with slippery synths and dangerous drum machines. Standouts include **Ernest Honny**'s New Wave "New Dance," **Pepper, Onion, Ginger & Salt**'s "M.C. Mambo" and **Nana Budjei**'s raging reggae workout "Asobrachie."

Dreamwork. We wrap things up with another offbeat Italian offering: **Il Sogno del Marianaio**'s optimistic third album, *Terzo* (Improved Sequence). Long-rocking California bassist **Mike Watt**, guitarist vocalist **Stefano Pilla** and drummer **Paolo Mongardion** comprise this sophisticated power trio (the name means "the sailor's dream"), who mix instrumentals (such as the heavy, Beatles-y "None Dare Call It Conspiracy") with funny ("Max Roach 8 Ball") and not-so-funny (the Walt Whitman-inspired "Song for Anima Mundi") tracks of a poetic bent—with unflagging charm, buoyancy and style.



Camera Obscura