

I Am Not Afraid Of You And I Will Beat Your Ass  
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Ira Kaplan, Georgia Hubley and James McNew sound like no other band. This is not because they're contrarians, but because they're artists. I Am Not Afraid Of You And I Will Beat Your Ass has everything that ever made Yo La Tengo great, but elevated to new heights, from the remarkable orchestral chamber piece "Black Flowers" to the garage-punk rave-up "Watch Out For Me Ronnie." If there's one constant about Yo La Tengo, it's that this famously restless band continues to broaden its horizons.

I Am Not Afraid Of You And I Will Beat Your Ass is an album that delights in being an album. This is no mere loud followed by soft merry-go-round, but a subtle parade. Bookended by very different but equally intense ten-minute-plus guitar epics, the set has dramatic arcs that don't all build in expected ways. After a dense thicket of forest they may find a clearing, stop for a picnic, but then fall asleep, dreaming away as day turns to night. A violin (played by David Mansfield, of Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue) threads its way through the heartbreakingly fragile "I Feel Like Going Home," mirroring the longing in Georgia's vocal, after which "Mr. Tough" struts in on a funky piano riff, with Ira and James singing in falsetto about the transformative power of music.

As much as the full album experience is about the big picture, Yo La Tengo are aware of the small moments. In fact, it is the slivers that make the band so hard to describe: The ambient static in the haunting instrumental "Daphnia"; Georgia's dramatic reading of the vaguely "Autumn Sweater"-esque "The Room Got Heavy"; the way the drums, bass, and tambourine turn themselves inside-out in the intro of "Pass The Hatchet, I Think I'm Goodkind".

The band's quest for musical release is inextricably tied to a sense of community. It's suffused with the hope borne of realizing that if music can transcend the fractious or mundane realities of life, then we can and must rise above the troubles that divide us (see "Mr Tough"). They embody these ideas in dealings with fellow musicians, and have worked with an incredibly diverse range of artists, from Jad Fair to Ray Davies. Their week of Hanukkah shows at Maxwell's has become an annual Hoboken tradition and raised tens of thousands for local charities, as scores of guests take the stage, stepping into a community forged around the gentle yet sturdy triumvirate that is Yo La Tengo. Similarly, the band's Swing State Tour in fall 2004 encapsulated much of what the band is about, involving tons of friends, a wild array of songs, a radically-different three-hour set each night, and political motivation with little to no actual politics at the shows except by implication.

It's been said that while Yo La Tengo is not a jazz combo, they think like jazz musicians, and indeed their penchant for surprise stretches beyond their well-documented work with free-jazz ensembles Other Dimensions In Music and the Sun Ra Arkestra. Their annual covers-by-request WFMU fundraiser gets a huge audience and lots of laughs (and a CD compilation released earlier this year as Yo La Tengo Is Murdering The Classics), but is also a shocking display of improvisational skill (and ridiculously encyclopedic knowledge of pop history). In July 2004, they performed at the Anthology Film Archives in NYC, improvising a soundtrack to a live light show by artists Joshua White and Gary Panter, which led to their using a Panter painting as the cover of I Am Not Afraid.

Clearly, Yo La Tengo act like no other band either. Since their last record, Summer Sun, they've also scored four films ("Junebug," "Game 6," "Old Joy," and the forthcoming "Shortbus") and turned what could have been an inspired one-off - their score to the experimental underwater films of Jean Painlevé - into a well-received CD release and frequent repeat performance. They recorded the Simpsons theme for one episode, and played on the recent Gilmore Girls finale. Anderson Cooper loves 'em.

As a trio, Yo La Tengo are a complex engine, but they're a completely natural one, tearing through the underbrush like a fully focused prehistoric creature. As much as spontaneity is built into the construction of their sonic world, everything is considered. From whispered ballads to punkish verve, from intricate arrangements to the heady allure of happenstance, Yo La Tengo - as their name suggests - have it all. They manage the near impossible of satisfying both their quest for the loving embrace of their unshakable musical character, and the tirelessness that has kept them from repeating themselves.

Whether one thinks of life as being brief or interminable, the clock is always ticking. We must be ever grateful for any endeavors which distort our sense of time. That is one of the many things that Yo La Tengo do.

--David Greenberger