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The Magnetic Fields Offer a Masterclass in Pop Composition

John Amen · Wednesday, May 20th, 2020

The Magnetic Fields' new album *Quickies* features twenty-eight tracks, the longest tune in the sequence lasting all of two minutes and thirty-three seconds. Many of the songs enroll a listener from the first note or phrase, offering a chorus that cycles in a listener's head for the rest of the day. Or perhaps the rest of the week.

"The Day the Politicians Died" is a wistfully satiric gem reminiscent of *Pet Sounds*-era Brian Wilson, carried by Claudia Gonson's crystalline vocal. Merritt offers his drolly baritone on the reflective "Castle Down a Dirt Road." "My Stupid Boyfriend," a duet between Merritt and Shirley Simms, might've been plucked from a Broadway musical, replete with comedic but precise lyrics and a timeless melody.

When listening to The Beatles' early songs, I'm frequently struck by how much is accomplished in such a short amount of time, usually under/well under three minutes. I often had the same impression while listening to *Quickies*. "I've Got a Date with Jesus" is a minimally textural prize, Simms's voice reminiscent of a wistful Trish Keenan or Mary Therese Hansen. "(I Want to Join A) Biker Gang" spotlights Merritt embracing his inner Joey Ramone, a wafting back-up vocal adding refined textures. "The Price You Pay" could've been a Dusty Springfield tune, replete with a spacey/60s-esque vocal and jangly instrumentation. "Evil Rhythm" is a mock-bluesy tune that reminds me of an experimental PJ Harvey.

A few tracks on *Quickies* occur as truncated or incomplete; however, even pieces that might've benefited from additional development include melodic fragments that stand out, transitions from verse to chorus that, while seemingly simple, operate as how-to manifestos. On the other hand, at least half of *Quickies* showcases impeccable songwriting, some of the more artfully crafted and integrated hooks, segues, and gestalts in contemporary popular music.

I've found myself returning to *Quickies* again and again – along with 1999's *69 Love Songs* and 2017's *50 Song Memoir* – skipping a few tracks, playing many repeatedly, ten, fifteen times. This project makes pop composition look easy when it's anything but

8.2/10

(Featured image: front cover of *Quickies*)

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