



*The modern, old-fashioned sound
of the lonesome, crowded west.*



"Lift me out of this dustbowl and hand me a champagne"
Key Principles, Nathan

What is western music? Is it the sound of the wide open plains or a smoky saloon? Tales of taciturn men and long-suffering ladies who cry tears in their beer? Or has that tradition been replaced by something more complicated, where horses have become fast cars and saloons are now strip malls, but even in the most urban setting, there's the restless, rough-and-tumble feel of a frontier town, and everyone still yearns to get the hell out of Dodge sometimes?

It's that kind of west that Nathan taps into on their third album, *Key Principles*. The Winnipeg band, singer/guitarist Keri Latimer, singer/accordionist/banjo-ist/guitarist Shelley Marshall, bassist Devin Latimer and drummer Damon Mitchell harness the essence of the Canadian Prairies in the same way songwriter Jim White puts his finger on the idiosyncrasies of the American South. From John Paul's *Delivery*, a nostalgic ode to sneaking out of the house to "campfire fuelled by some old fence / skies like planetariums," to *Trans Am*, whose gentle thrum is the sound of small-town restlessness ("This is not a great escape / no miles to go no distance gained / the foreground bends to let me by / it knows I won't leave it behind"), Nathan documents the paradox of places that are somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

It's a sound the band has been honing since the release of their 2001 debut, *Stranger*, and refined on their sophomore album, the Juno-nominated *Jimson Weed*, which brought home awards and garnered critical kudos across North America. For *Key Principles*, however, Nathan wanted to

uproot their rootsy sound a bit. To that end, they enlisted producer Howard Redekopp (New Pornographers, Tegan & Sara), who introduced an expansive sonic palette that helped the band navigate the line between their two-steppin' tendencies and their pure pop passion. There's room here for Brill Building melodies, Kurt Weill cabaret and Tex-Mex mariachi. The banjos are balanced with horns; the twang is tempered with a little Theremin and the cantering rhythms are accented by handclaps.

That's not to say *Key Principles* is slick. In an age of push-button music, Nathan's songs feel endearingly, alluringly homemade (a philosophy that goes farther than just the songwriting -- consider the quilts hand-stitched by Keri and Shelley that decorate the stage at live shows and serve as evocative album art). And the homey feel follows through to *Key Principles'* subject matter, which often centers on the idea of domestic life.

That's no surprise. Family can't help but influence on the two songwriters, as Shelley is mother to a toddler and Keri was seven months pregnant while recording the album. But in true Nathan fashion, that domesticity has a dark side; in every dream home a haunting. It's a darkness that's belied by the clear, sweet voices twining around each other like ivy, but below all the sun-dappled leaves reaching upward, there's a twisted, gnarled root that burrows into dark places "So heavy-hearted / you've been combing the carpets / turning over the couches / ear and glass to the wall," they sing in *Secrets*.

But that duality is a big part of what defines the Prairies, after all: darkness and light. And Nathan captures it all, the modern, old-fashioned sound of the lonesome, crowded west.

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Nathan has released one of the more interesting and original albums that I have heard for a long time and there is no better compliment I can pay them than that. ~ Dan Wilkinson, Americana-UK



Americana-UK

Review by Dan Wilkinson (9 out of 10)

In Americana circles, there are so many bands that seem to eschew songs and melody in order to play a funereal dirge that they seem to think makes them more 'real' than other bands. Thankfully Nathan is not one of those bands. In fact, it has been a long time since I have heard a band reach out and embrace melody and song writing craft in quite such a blatant and exuberant manner. Nathan is all the better band for this. It is as if someone has given the band a country, jazz and blues 101, from which they have hand picked the best characteristics of each genre. Rhythms are relentlessly perky and upbeat while the bass nearly always keeps things moving with a traditional I-V pattern. The female harmony vocals only serve to add to the good time vibe of the record. Highlights include the jazz tinged number 'Emelina' and the more trad country tune 'Stone'. Some songs are of course weaker than others but the sum of the parts more than makes up for any less excellent moments. Instrumentation is interesting across the board encompassing trumpet, banjo and mandolin along with guitar, bass and drums. Ultimately the only criticism I can make of Nathan is that they seem to be incapable of writing a sad song at this time, but there is more than enough misery in other artists music to make up for this 'deficiency'. Nathan has released one of the more interesting and original albums that I have heard for a long time and there is no better compliment I can pay them than that. www.americana-uk.com

Calgary Sun ★★★★★

by Darryl Sterdan, Aug. 10, 2004

That sweet devil waltz

FILE UNDER: Sweethearts of the rodeo.

LOWDOWN: Some roots acts tie themselves in knots trying to be as nostalgically authentic as possible. Not Nathan.

That's not a backhanded compliment — just an observation of the way these quirky alt-country popsters carry themselves on their endearing sophomore disc (and major-label debut) Jimson Weed.

Sure, the strummy acoustic guitars and plucky banjos, the wheezing accordion and haunting pedal steel — not to mention the gentle melodies, girlish vocals and home-spun harmonies of Keri McTighe and Shelley Marshall — give these 14 snappy tracks a warm, woody, back-porch-at-sunset feel.

But even at their darkest and most rustically Appalachian, you get the sense that Nathan put honesty and immediacy before verisimilitude.

Clearly, these tracks aren't meant to serve as museum pieces. Otherwise, we wouldn't hear contemporary touches like the rocky stomp of Big Galoot, the howling Theremin of Discarded Debris and the twangy electric guitars throughout this 47-minute disc.

McTighe's lyrics, however, are the biggest giveaway, poetically mixing the madness and murder of gothic Americana with the creative imagery of modern music. "I've got gadgets that mold the things that are old into sleek facsimiles of what was once guaranteed to please," she says, eloquently — if wordily — summing up the situation.

We would put it this way: It's not that Nathan don't care about where they came from. They're just far more interested in where they're going. And judging by the strength of Jimson Weed, the sky's the limit.

Exclaim Magazine

by David McPherson, September 2004

Appalachian Army of Darkness

Right from Keri McTighe's sleepy, yet assertive opening two lines of "I won't be here when you call me / you might go crazy thinking I have gone" from the disc's best track "Sunset Chaser," you are transported by Nathan's lead singer and songwriter's captivating storytelling. With its dark imagery and airy country sounds, one imagines Nathan as natives of the Appalachian region, rather than purveyors of the Portage and Main scene in Winnipeg. McTighe's masterful songwriting is combined with Shelley Marshall's complementary harmonies, Devin Latimer's bass, and Daniel Roy's disciplined drums to create a sound that echoes the likes of Gillian Welch and Oh Susanna, but still defies classification. Add Burke Carroll's pedal steel and dobro and you have one tight band. Nathan's numbers jump just as easily from bluegrass ballads in the Appalachian tradition such as the aforementioned, "Sunset Chaser" and "Home With Me," to Tim Pan Alley, ragtime and waltz numbers such as "Emelina" and "Lock Your Devils Up." Themes of regret, female empowerment and betrayal, murder and retribution all weave themselves one way or another into the 14 tracks. Jimson Weed is Nathan's debut for Nettwerk, and what a stunning and soulful one it is. With its angelic anthems, accomplished musicianship, and unpredictable musical twists and turns this Jimson Weed, unlike its medicinal namesake, has few side effects, but like the plant, an overdose should be considered potentially serious and medical intervention sought. (Nettwerk, www.nettwerk.com)

"If you're about to commit suicide, Jimson Weed might change your mind. If you're having sex, it may turn you into a super-duper lover of epic pleasure-giving capabilities...Jimson Weed is one of the most expertly crafted albums to come this way in some time." ~ Dylan Gibbs, *news-4u.com*, US

Uptown Magazine

by John Kendle, Winnipeg, MB, Sept. 2, 2004

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Jimson weed is a hallucinogen and this album indeed offers a trip through desire and heartache, joy and happiness and doubt and pain via all sorts of internal monologues brought to life and set to music. Some may raise eyebrows at the 'down home' vibe, yet all is not what it seems. There's a poetry and an ache in the keening pedal steel, twanging banjo and old-timey harmonies of these tunes, an ache that hints at deeper themes — a Wicked Witch looming darkly over a seeming romp through Wonderland. Feel for a moment the pain of the woman in Sunset Chaser, who imagines her abandoned lover working himself into a rage with a passion he never showed her. Or consider the notion of trying out all your life's bad ideas at once because you can't face the one good thing you've had (Bad Ideas). Jimson Weed is rife with these sorts of stories, which reveal themselves more with every listen. Treasure it, live with it and you will be rewarded.

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