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THE HANDSOME FAMILY: WILDERNESS

By [Matt Arado](#) / 9 June 2013

Listening to the Handsome Family's music feels a bit like traveling to another world—a place both beautiful and frightening, where the cry of a bird or the whispering shake of a tree branch can herald great cruelty and pain. It's not a world I'd want to be stuck in forever, but I'm always grateful for the chance to visit.



THE HANDSOME FAMILY
WILDERNESS

Carrot Top
2013-05-14

That holds true for the band's ninth and latest record, *Wilderness*, a loose concept album in which contemplation of Nature serves as a springboard for more of the band's journeys into dream-like surrealism. In these songs we find a woman who is struck by lightning and then wrapped inside a caterpillar's cocoon; a man who is pursued and ultimately ripped apart by spiders, ants and snakes; and yet another man who lives his life surrounded by watchful owls. *Wilderness* doesn't quite match the Handsome Family's best work, which for my money is 2000's superb *In The Air*, but it's a hypnotic and memorable addition to the band's catalog.

For the uninitiated, the Handsome Family consists of the Albuquerque-based married duo, Brett and Rennie Sparks. Brett writes the band's music, a moody atmospheric mix of traditional American styles—country, folk, ragtime, blues. Brett is also the band's singer; his expressive baritone, which can hit astonishing lows, is a key component of the band's sound. Rennie writes the lyrics, which tend to focus on the dark side of human relationships as well as the mysterious beauty of the natural world.

Each of the songs on *Wilderness* is named after an animal, a gimmick that might cause some to groan. But the titles are just starting points for Rennie's vivid and varied tales. Album opener "Flies" begins with an image of a bloody and dying General Custer, then shifts into a meditation on humanity's conquest of nature: "Dear Custer there's a Wal-Mart now where once the grizzlies roamed". "Woodpecker" is a sympathetic portrait of Mary Sweeney, a real-life woman who was institutionalized after going on a window-smashing spree in her 19th-century Wisconsin town: "She was a woodpecker, she couldn't help but see/All the things that hide inside all the pretty trees". And "Spider" tells the story of the poor sap who finds himself stalked by creepy crawlies of all sorts, until a "million little teeth tore me to pieces". Rennie's lyrics crackle with a love for language, and they live on in your mind like lines from the best fiction.

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the holiday”.

The music on *Wilderness* is typically understated Americana, with acoustic instruments—banjo, piano, mandolin, guitar—doing much of the heavy lifting. Most of these songs move at a slow burn, and the languid pace is bound to test the patience of some listeners, particularly those new to the band (I grew frustrated myself at certain points). But stick with it: The subtle beauty of these songs reveals itself gradually, over the course of repeated listens.

Brett and Rennie have been making music together as the Handsome Family for two decades now, and *Wilderness* shows that their collaboration remains as vital as ever. The album moves slowly, yes, but it’s never boring, and the songs once again open doors to a strange and fascinating new world.

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