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Kitchens of Distinction: Folly

By [Matt Casarino](#) 7 November 2013

“Under an old oak tree / I found his young body / Took him and his heart inside / Promised him as my bride.” So begins Folly, the new album by Kitchens of Distinction, and it never looks back. Here’s an album filled with deeply personal and provocative lyrics, sung with passion and restraint, stacked upon layers and layers of beautiful noise. It’s a genuine stunner, and the strongest, most breathtaking album I’ve heard all year.

The lyrics I quoted above are from the opener “Oak Tree”, and they’re either menacing, romantic, or both—a quality that describes a lot of Folly. The song turns out to be devastatingly sad, but it’s the defiance that stays with you, the plaintive strength of a man unwilling to hide who he is and what he believes. That strength is all over Folly as well; it surges through the lyrics, the bold changes, the risky musical choices that somehow never seem gratuitous, never topple into bombast. It’s quite an accomplishment, and listening to it is an active experience. I recommend headphones and darkness.

You’re forgiven if you’ve never heard of Kitchens of Distinction. They formed in London back in the late ‘80s, and they did fairly well there for a while, touring with Suzanne Vega while charting with college-rock albums that earned comparisons to Cocteau Twins and Echo and the

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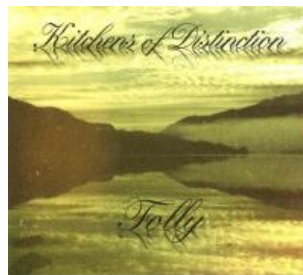
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Bunnymen. But the trio was uncompromising, personally and politically; they sang of killing Margaret Thatcher, and singer/songwriter Patrick Fitzgerald refused to hide his homosexuality behind codes and vague pronouns. Despite acclaim from all the right sources, they never broke in the US, and essentially called it quits in the mid-'90s. Folly represents their first album together in nearly 20 years.

If there's any justice, they will find an audience this time around. Folly has a sound immediately accessible, layered, and dangerous; it's loaded with sound, shimmering guitars and keyboards, huge drums, and the occasional orchestral flourish, often covered in a reverb that approaches Wall of Sound. And while the songs never quite take you where you expect to go, the journey still feels fresh and inevitable. Some bands load on the overdubs to distract you from weak songwriting or clichéd changes; this one does it to support the urgency and energy of these haunting melodies.

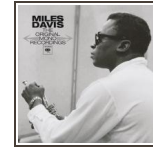
Fitzgerald's baritone always draws us in, even when his lyrics venture into tragic poetry ("Photographing Rain") or arcane references ("Extravagance," a paean to Italian heiress and beautiful mess Marchesa Luisa Casati). He provides a solid center amidst the swirling, almost psychedelic guitar work by Julian Swales, who co-wrote the music. A combination like this could easily be alienating, and I'm not exactly sure how Fitzgerald manages to sound grounded as the songs take off into parts unknown. But even when offering ominous and suspiciously metaphorical tales of lovers who vanish in the night ("Disappeared") and sorrows screamed into hollowed trees ("Wolves/Crows"), KOD keeps it passionate and personal, even relatable.

Maybe that comes from the perspective that age and experience brings. Fitzgerald, Swales, and drummer Dan Goodwin all turn 50 next year, and the theme of mortality runs rampant throughout Folly, particularly in "Oak Tree", "Extravagance", "Photographing Rain", and the incredible "No Longer Elastic". But it isn't all darkness; the Bowie-meets-My Bloody Valentine sheen of "Japan to Jupiter" offers fond nostalgia as Fitzgerald digs into his decadent glory days ("We're a scream, we don't look down / we're soaking in the glamour"), and the thrilling ending of "Elastic" turns the subject's sad acknowledgement that his youth is gone into an over-the-top triumph. But even if you ignore the lyrics, you cannot deny the band's stirring acumen with colorful chords and melodies that play on the fringes of dissonance without ever crossing over.

Besides, the songs actually grow more accessible as the album progresses into the final third. Fitzgerald is as direct as can be on the poppy "I Wish It Would Snow", giving voice to a sentiment we all understand ("I wish it would snow / And close the roads / So I couldn't go / And we could stay in bed all day") over shimmering guitars and tambourines. KOD follows that with "Tiny Moments Tiny Omens", another wistful weather-related song we can latch onto—until the final lines take us to an unexpectedly darker place, and the theme of mortality and the progression of time resonates again.

Maybe that's why I found the closing track, "The Most Beautiful Day", the smallest bit unsatisfying; you keep waiting for the gut-punch, but instead the swelling chords envelop you like a hug as Fitzgerald repeats the two-line, upbeat lyric in his lowest register. Still, it's the darkest-sounding happy song you've ever heard, and it's a fitting closer for this wonderful set.

Folly is about as transcendent as rock music gets. I have no idea if this lovely, thundering noise will secure Kitchens of Distinction a new audience, but I'm keeping my hopes high. Some may find the tales on Folly too dark and/or personal to handle, and some might have a hard time with



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the tricky melodies and offbeat chords. But if you've got a sense of adventure and you're holding out hope that even in these days of disposable product, rock music can approach art, you will love Folly. Set aside 45 minutes for yourself and let Fitzgerald and the boys make a canvas out of you.

Rating: 



Matt Casarino is a playwright & musician from Delaware. His plays have been published by Playscripts, Smith & Kraus, and Original Works. He loves all things, even the things he doesn't like.

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