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MUSIC

With a Little Help from His Friends

Smart, Well-Made Rock With Pop Overtones by Gramercy Arms

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By JIM FUSILLI [CONNECT](#)

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Dave Derby *Debora Francis*

It's been a rewarding year so far for grown-ups who enjoy smart, well-made rock with pop overtones. Exemplary albums include the War on Drugs' "Lost in the Dream," Joan as Police Woman's "The Classic," Jimi Goodwin's "Odludek" and now Gramercy Arms' "The Seasons of Love" (Reveal).

Gramercy Arms is led by Dave Derby, who since the late 1980s has been in many musical groups—including the Dambuilders, which featured on violin Joan as Police Woman's Joan Wasser, and the Norfolk Downs. Along with the New York-based Mr. Derby, 48, Gramercy Arms includes Sean Eden on guitar, Kevin March on drums and Rainy Orteca on bass. They have an easy way with the rock and pop compositions written by Mr. Derby, who counts among his influences Big Star, Lloyd Cole, Elvis Costello and some of their '60s predecessors such as the Beatles, Burt Bacharach, Neil Diamond, Herman's Hermits and the Turtles.

Mr. Derby previously wrote music and designed sound for many feature films, television programs and advertisements. The experience, he said during a phone conversation last week, taught him to economize in his songwriting. But even though it was once a dream job of his, he stepped away from composing for hire in 2009: He wanted a return of the joyful feeling that came with writing for his own projects.

Gramercy Arms had a revolving door on the studio when it recorded "The Seasons of Love." As he had done earlier with the Norfolk Downs, Mr. Derby invited many friends to sing along with him; this time, they include Matthew Caws of Nada Surf; Mr. Cole; Tanya Donnelly of Throwing Muses; Gedeon Luke; Ms. Wasser; and, in a gift to music fans, Erin Moran, who hasn't been heard from much since her gorgeous album "A Girl Called Eddy" was released a decade ago. Kendall Meade slides in alongside Mr. Derby to give an unexpected lift to the somber folk ballad "Playing With Fire." Claudia Gonson of the Magnetic Fields and Connie Renda join in on the chipper "Say the Word."

Mr. Derby turns over the lead vocals to Mr. Cole on the bittersweet "Beautiful Disguise," in which Ms. Wasser provides a vocal counterpoint and plays piano. Ms. Moran takes a verse in "Novemberlong," which bounces along joyfully like a Paul McCartney gem. With Mr. Caws and Ms. Donnelly, Ms. Moran also appears in "Yours Untruly," which sounds like a tribute to post-Beatles John Lennon.

But the singers aren't the only guests who enrich "The Seasons of Love." Mr. Derby felt the earliest versions of his songs had an energy and spontaneity he didn't want to lose during rerecording, so the band used his demos as the foundation. Prompted by Tom Rose, founder of Reveal Records, Mr. Derby brought in a variety of horn players. He used them to perfection, surrounding the vocalists on several tunes, including the charming album opener "Always in Love," with the warmth of varying combinations of flute, baritone and tenor sax, trombone and trumpet. Strings sweeten "Beautiful Disguise" and "Playing With Fire." Mr. Derby demonstrates his gift for arrangements and song structure as the horn and string ensembles enter when needed and recede effortlessly.

The blithe spirit of "The Seasons of Love" shouts out for live performances: Imagine a rotating cast of singers joining Gramercy Arms on stage and bringing Mr. Derby's songs to life. But he's occupied by his day job as a software designer—he has a master's degree in User Experience Architecture from New York University—so a national tour may be out of the question. Dates in Boston, New York and Philadelphia may be possible. Since his record label is based in the U.K., shows in England may happen. For now, "The Seasons of Love" is Mr. Derby's testimony to the kind of clever rock and pop that prizes craft, structure and arrangement without sacrificing joy.

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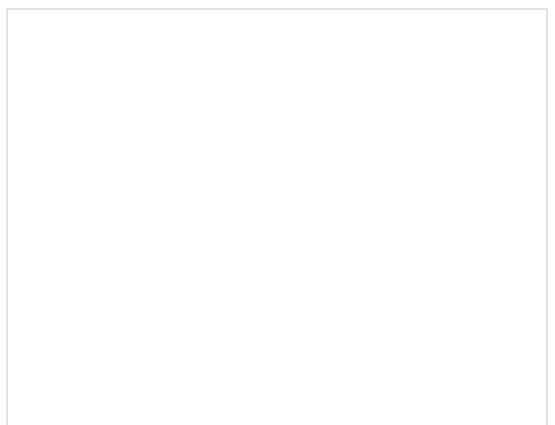
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