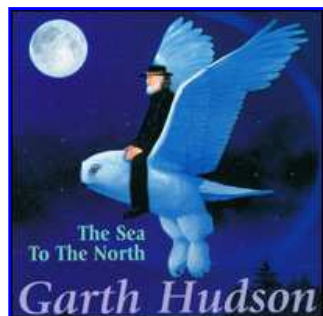


## Cave 17.

### Garth Hudson - *The Sea to the North*



Band member Garth Hudson's 2001 (and now re-released) solo album *The Sea to the North* had inauspicious beginnings. Richard Wall became fascinated with the improvised and — and extended — intro to “Chest Fever” that was released as “Genetic Method” on *Rock of Ages*. The piece is an amazing example of Hudson's skill, meandering (as Hudson was attempting to stretch out to hit “Auld Lang Syne at the stroke of midnight) but creative and exciting. It may or may not be Hudson's finest moment, and it certainly shouldn't serve as the genesis for an album, even though it inspired Wall to pursue such a thing. When I was describing the disc to Zeth, he asked if it was 40 minutes of “Genetic Method”. It isn't, but there's a certain heart of truth there. The opening number, the 12-minute “The Saga of Cyrus and Mulgrew” certainly is, blending prog with New Age-y stylings and covering enough ground to be its own EP (Decemberists fans, perhaps, take note). Hudson doesn't falter, but the music sounds like the album's cover - a drawing of Hudson riding a giant snow owl under a full moon — looks. Fortunately, Hudson doesn't linger in owl-prog mode. He blends in folk, Americana, and trad jazz traditions; Indian folk music; and Old World forms I'm not learned enough to delineate (yay Gypsys circa 2006!). The album does what apparently everyone involved set out to do, which is to cover more ground than Sacagaea. Hudson himself plays more instruments than is reasonable, including a variety of synthesizers, two saxophones, a melodica, and some instruments I had to look up (don't act like you know what a tarogato and a khamak are).

The songs vary as much as the instrumentation.”The Breakers” features Hudson's wife Maud's spoken vocals, with lyrics like “I am water / You are air.” It's post-hippy lite jazz with accordion. I don't know what to do with it. There's something oddly compelling about it, but neither because it's good nor because it's a train wreck. I think primarily because it's Garth Hudson doing post-hippy lite jazz with accordion.

That, for the most part, sums up the album. Hudson remains a remarkable musician and listening to what he can do — not only the playing, but the composition — offers continual rewards. Putting Levon Helm's drumming over khamak, ektar, and tablas (besides the listed “percussion”) sounds like a great idea, and sort of is (see “Third Order”). You might not throw it on your next party mix — and you absolutely won't unless you're far more contrarian than I suspect — but you might want to, I don't know, go after the polyrhythmic complexities of the pieces.

In the end, though, *The Sea to the North* plays longer than it is, even with the variation. You can feel Hudson drawing on everything he'd like to use, and pushing himself outward as much as possible. Each song warrants attention as an artifact, but five lengthy invent-a-genre cuts can be a challenge (in a value neutral way), even if they're followed by a gorgeous little solo piano piece. Simply put: recommended for Band completists and owl-prog fans.

This was written by Justin Cober-Lake. Posted on [Sunday, July 20, 2008](#), at [8:19 pm](#). Filed under [Meta](#), [Music](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Follow comments here with the [RSS feed](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#).

#### One Comment

1. Zeth Lundy wrote:

I'm so happy that you've officially coined the term “owl-prog.”

Wednesday, July 23, 2008 at 7:52 am | [Permalink](#)