

DELUSIONS & ADEQUACY

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I think the simpler the mission of a given rock band is, the more fanciful and obfuscated the language used to describe it can get. How one guitar and a drum kit can give flower to such a bouquet of "-ism"s is a remarkable thing to see. Just ask the White Stripes. To be fair, though, I don't think that it's always the fault of overzealous critics simply getting carried away. It can be genuinely tough to nail down the exact impact of the stripped-down and (okay, I'll say it) "minimalist" sensibility that has taken hold of so many corners of the rock world in the last several years. What is clear is that while such a sensibility will, of course, succeed or fail based on the skill of the band in question, when it does work it's a great thing to hear.

One thing is that certainly has to be harder to do than it sounds. The Burdens, a husband-wife duo from upstate New York, build their songs around simple beats and, often, just a single line of lyrics. All their songs are short and to the point, as they've studiously cleared away all the accoutrements and grace notes and distilled each song down to the most important lyric, the key chord change, and the melody's most effective hook. I mentioned the White Stripes earlier, but really the only thing the bands have in common is the impulse to cut out the nonsense and get to the point. Urbanity and hipness aren't part of the Burdens' mission statement. *Uh Oh*, the band's debut release, sounds easygoing and often downright sunny in places, though the lyrics can be cryptic and slippery.

Two of the songs at the album's center don't make any sense at all, at least not in any traditional way. On "Uh Oh," frontman Richard Scullin sings only the repeated phrase "Roy G Biv"; likewise, the bluesy "Oh No" features only the words "Oh, no." Truthfully, the songs with a little more going on, like "All We Are," work a little better. And note that even that song has only one lyric, it just sounds more complicated, a little more like a song and less like an experiment. An even better example is "Blind Philosophy" – just an all-around great song.

It makes more sense to take the album as a whole, a single project. In that sense I think it's a great success. Like *Now You Know*, Doug Martsch's post-Built to Spill solo debut, *Uh Oh's* simplicity disarms you and invites you in, really invites you to listen to it, and its charms reveal themselves slowly. That's what lo-fi can do best, and the Burdens seem to know this.

George Ford, 12/15/2004