

# The Caribbean

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**February 5, 2001** I'm about to write 400 words about a band I know nothing about. My first and only introduction to the Caribbean came three weeks ago, when their full-length debut album, *Verse by Verse*, found its way into my mailbox, sandwiched between a number of relatively lackluster releases from Endearing Records. It's my custom to listen to at least three or four tracks off every album I get. In the Caribbean's case, I listened to the entire disc. Thrice.

The album feels like a rain-soaked walk home through a desolate urban landscape. The Caribbean's melancholy songs are short and on-point (the album's 11 tracks clock in at just over 30 minutes), but, rather than being cohesive little pop ditties with big, final chorus payoffs, they come across more like symphonic tone poems, twisting and turning through their exploration of subtle emotion. The music is spacey, mellow, and quirky, thickly textured at times and sparse at others, always evocative but never manipulative.

How many bands out there today can write songs about relationships without pissing me off? Angst-ridden "why won't she love me back"

whiners working the pity vote get low marks in my book and so do groveling over-apologists hoping to come off as "sensitive" enough to provoke some ditzy fan into ripping off her pants after the show. The Caribbean, by contrast, scores high with their moody but nevertheless upbeat "Help Would Only Confuse Me" and no-nonsense, occasionally beautiful "Verse by Verse."

Urban decay takes a unique sub-thematic role throughout the album. Quite possibly the only band to have read Jane Jacobs' seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and understood its pertinence to music as well as urbanism, the Caribbean seems to have a keen sense of how much the homogeneity of suburban living has afflicted modern popular music. Lest you think my analysis reaches too far, even the album art-- stark black-and-whites of sprawling, empty parking lots hemmed in by dirty skyscrapers-- points to the same nostalgia for the vitality of a time gone by that I hear in the music.

I'm going out on a bit of a limb with this article. I've never heard the

Caribbean live and don't know anyone who has. I mean, I haven't even figured out how many people are in the band or what their names are. But one of my most firmly held tenets is that quality albums are a result of good production or good songwriting. While the Caribbean has both, it's the latter that shines, and that, coupled with their solid musicianship, is all I'm really asking for. -James Graham

## ACE Weekly

JANUARY 25, 2001

Going to the Caribbean is expensive. But I can tell you about the next best thing, which is hearing the Caribbean at Detour tonight. These Washington, DC folks make a happy kind of bedroom pop—not sleazy like porn, not repressed like Ron and Laura in the 50s Dick Van Dyke show. It's soft and supple, counter-melodious and wickedly full, eternally mellow and a natural progression of pop to pop; as if XTC, Burt Bacharach, the Smiths and Badfinger all got together for a brawl but ended up becoming friends and having coffee together instead. In great big comfy couches. The Caribbean sounds just like that, but in a musical equivalent. It's good. Just go.

-Rob Bricken

Charlottetown's News & Arts Weekly

## cville



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### Week of February 19, 2001

If you're hanging out in DC and you find yourself in Dupont Circle, head over to the Phillips Collection, where a full room of Rothkos awaits you. Subtle, bright and dark washes of colour greet you in a variety of combinations that convey as many emotions: despair, restlessness, tranquility, poise, odd moments of content and happiness. *Verse by Verse* evokes a similar palette of emotions -- never loud, but never dull, either.

Washington, DC's Smart Went Crazy and the Townies contributed members to make the Caribbean. This is the group's first full-length, and it promises a bright future for them. They sound like the Sundays after a cup or two of espresso (eyes half open instead of eyes mostly shut) and with the vox run through a filter (not a vocoder). Jangly guitars and great harmonizing create the body of the work -- see "What Would Jane Jacobs Say?" and "Knife Replaces Blade" -- while cute effects, such as disembodied voices emitting one word and then disappearing ("Front Row at the Rodeo"), polish the work to make the music the fun-fest that it is.

A sense of humour always gives a pop band extra points for charm, and the Caribbean is getting full marks for their subtle yuks. "Help Would Only

Confuse Me" grabs the listener with the great title and giggly chorus, sung in a very calm, nonchalant tone; the unusual effect the strings create, a dark undertone, raises the cheerful hopelessness of the lyrics into sharp relief. Whenever piano is employed, as in the title track, the player adds great colour to songs that are already well-shaded with meaning; the organic, repetitive percussion amplifies the piano rather than distorting it. "What Would Jane Jacobs Say?" is fun listening for DC natives, as it lists a variety of local hotspots. "I Am the Mosque" adds some lo-fi background noise, odd, mellow organ tones and a lone whistle.

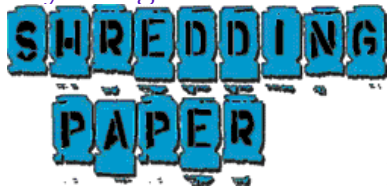
Most of the songs are short, drawing the listener in and making her want to hear more -- and at that point, the music abruptly cuts off, each idea succinctly stated. The entire disc has great cross-generational appeal; my father heard it, my younger sister (who hates indie pop) heard it, and both liked it a hell of a lot. That could spell a great future for radio play, or mean that the fourth rider of the Apocalypse is coming through. I'm not sure which. In any case, it's fairly certain that you'll like *Verse by Verse*. If you missed The Caribbean on tour (likely, unless you live in a very small chunk of the Mid-Atlantic), you can make up for it by running out and buying this CD as quickly as you possibly can.

-- Jenn Sikes



An attentive listener to The Caribbean gives you the sense experimental leanings and a taste for brevity should meet more often. The majority of "Verse by Verse"'s songs run less than three minutes, yet change tone and density breezily enough to seem like six. This is meant as a compliment. A "bedroom pop" outfit from DC, The Caribbean is dippy like Syd Barrett, concise like Guided by Voices. Vocals serve as an instrumental glue more than a narrative, despite provocative titles such as "Help Would Only Confuse Me." A lo-fi moment can suddenly jump into the headphone hijinx before you can say "prog-folk." Rhythm is the most volatile variable. The two-second loop that drives "I am the Mosque" needs little embellishment. What initially sounds stark is actually loaded. --Doug Taylor

The Caribbean's self-titled EP was such a tease when I heard it earlier this year. In eight songs they managed to convince me they could write and perform anything they wanted with exceeding aplomb. Intellectual indie pop? Jazzy, oblique ballads? Brazilian-tinted numbers? Anything. The wait



ISSUE 8 for Verse By Verse, their debut on Endearing, was long and tortuous, but worth it. Composed of former D.C. groups (Townies, Smart Went Crazy) The Caribbean moves with ease through a number of potentially sticky genres. Their self-effacing press bio would have you believe it's the help they get from their friends, but that's nonsense. The strength comes from the necessarily premeditated intermingling of Michael Kentoff (vocals/instruments), Tony Dennison (drums), and Matt Byars

(instruments). Their long-distance tape-mailing produces some wonderfully assorted results. It's hard to believe the tight, dynamic "Have You Thought About Turning Pro?" was recorded in three different cities. It's got one of the crunchiest, most satisfying guitar interludes this side of Superchunk. Kentoff's nasal, often quiet vocals stand out against the crisp acoustic guitar, (sometimes sampled) drums and tinkling, breezy sounds. The arrangement on songs like "I Am the Mosque" and "Help Would Only Confuse Me" is enough for me to wrap my mind around for weeks. Their agreeable, experimental fusion of old-school pop, jazz, and indie makes good on the implied transcendence of pop conventions on their EP. And then some.  
-John Wenzel

Boasting ex-members of influential DC bands Smart Went Crazy and Townies, the Caribbean strays from the more abrasive sounds that characterize their roots. Rather than assault their listeners with dissonant guitar parts and pounding drums, the Caribbean takes a much more low-key approach, relying heavily on acoustic guitars and dreamy pop melodies that often sit atop a solid layer of electronic sounds. The melodies -both guitar and vocal- on their



January 2001 debut

full-length, *Verse by Verse* are so dreamy, in fact, that on songs like "What Would Jane Jacobs Say?" and "Mancunian Candidate," there's a resemblance to some of John Lennon's late-era Beatles material like "Across the Universe" or "Tomorrow Never Knows." The impressive thing about the Caribbean is their ability to shine as pure, almost folk songwriters even with the use of electronic sounds. *Verse by Verse* isn't without flaws, though. At times the band seems to lose direction, and the songs, while always complex and well performed, fail to demand much attention. Even with a few low points, it's clear that there's something pure and, therefore, intriguing about this band. With their past apparently left far behind, it'll be exciting to see what comes of them in the future.  
-Mike Conley

Someone once said that music crosses all boundaries. That may or may not be true...but in the case of The Caribbean it at least means that music crosses the boundary between the United States and Canada. To get to the point... all three members of The Caribbean live in the States, but it took the good sense of the Canadian Endearing label to release their music. This is most certainly one of those cases where any reviewer is going to be hard pressed to find any distinct comparisons for the simple reason that this band's music goes all over the map (and even off the map in many cases). The music is...for the most part...moody pop, but as you journey through this disc you are

I've been thinking about what I was going to write about *Verse by Verse*, the debut LP by The Caribbean, for a several of weeks now. I talked about it a little



over e-mail with Maria Sciarrino, whose photo is on the cover (she's also got some photos in the art archive of this site). She called it "non-formulaic and difficult pop music." I remarked on its excellent production, especially for a home-recording. Now I'd like to call it "strong and confident in its frailty." There are a lot of

also treated to experimental music as well as segments that border on jazz. While many bands attempt to incorporate bits and fragments from anywhere and everywhere into their music...very few succeed. What usually happens is that you end up with a disc full of disjointed experiments and egos that have gone out of control. The guys in The Caribbean don't fall victim to the usual trappings. No, instead they use all sorts of different styles of music as a vehicle through which to express their slow, mesmerizing pop music. The vocals are low key (sounding a bit like Chris Stamey at times), and the overall feel is something

contradictions in those descriptions. But I think they're apt. It is pop music, but these songs don't follow the progressions and arrangements that immediately spring to mind when one considers pop music. There are a lot of sounds and *noises* floating around the record that you don't expect from pop music.

Pop music is soft, fuzzy, and warm. These songs are ghostly, airy, and eerie...yet, strangely, still warm. I've probably listened to *Verse by Verse* fifteen times in the last three weeks.

like a subtle soundtrack to a dream. If this sounds confusing, it probably is...because we honestly can't come up with the exact words to describe this. And that, in and of itself, should be reason enough to check out this clever and unusual band...



February 2001

It is a record that grows on you. It sticks around in the corners of the subconscious and comes back to you when you're not expecting it. That's something that great records do. It's starting to sound like a great record to me.

February 2001

While I liked The Caribbean's 1999 self-titled EP well enough, this full-length release is a huge leap forward. Two of the five full-length tracks on that EP seemed to fit the band's name a bit too well, given the trendiness of revamped tropical, particularly Brazilian, styles, but Verse by Verse suggests that the sense of space and sonic exploration that characterized other tracks on that EP (such as "Impure" and

February 27, 2001



"Soundproofing Makes a Practice Space") are more central to the band's aesthetic. Originality would seem nearly impossible at this late date, but The Caribbean combine their ingredients ingeniously to achieve something very like it. Oft-acoustic instrumentation and creatively used percussion are treated with reverb and echo to create almost a new instrument, like the cavernous background piano on the title track. Throughout Verse by Verse The Caribbean displays a keen and creative ear for arrangement and production, such as the way the sampled drums (from Talking Heads' "Warning Sign") and acoustic drums temporarily go out of phase near the end of "Front Row at the Rodeo," the glockenspiel

and cello accents that well up unexpectedly on a few tracks, the odd sound (bowed zither?) punctuating the lazy acoustic glide of "Help Would Only Confuse Me," or the distorted electric guitar that erupts out of nowhere near the end of the otherwise delicate "Knife Replaces Blade." All of this arranging legerdemain serves some fine songs with the sorts of melodic and chordal contours that at first hearing sound unexpected but prove to be guided by their own satisfying logic. (And as you probably noticed, they have a way with titles as well.) My only complaint about this CD is that it's over too soon - but that only allows me to start it over again. - Jeff Norman



It's time for a new definition of the phrase "lounge music." Sure enough, this term seems appropriate enough for the genre it usually represents, but something tells me there's other music that begs for the genre name that doesn't recall sipping martinis under a slowly rotating disco ball, leaning on a bar in your leisure suit, and chatting it up with the dark-haired, pseudo-intellectual, all-too-stylish chick with the sequined dress. No, perhaps the word "lounge" can be transferred from the noun to the verb. As in, the type of music you put on when you want to lounge around the house, reclining in your La-Z-Boy by the window on a sunny day. Or maybe out in the yard in the hammock on that same day, if you're lucky enough to have a hammock. Or a yard. Clearly, this has to do with the Caribbean's first full-length release, *Verse by Verse*. The songs are crafted with pop chord progressions, and certainly, a couple of songs, like "Have You Thought about Turning Pro?," feature a somewhat vigorous pop leaning. But more often than not, *Verse by Verse* drifts lazily through your ears and reverberates through your mind, although it may take a few listens to notice. And even if the tempo is upbeat, Don Zientara's versatile production style helps each instrument hover just off the ground, subdued and with clarity, rather than settling them in busy rhythmic excitement. The ex-Townies sect of the Caribbean includes Michael Kentoff and Matthew Byars. Kentoff's nasal, restrained vocals pervade the group's sound. And they also bring Townies' knack for interesting titles to the mix as well, with tracks like "Help Would Only Confuse Me" and "I Am the Mosque." Ex-Smart

Went Crazy drummer Tony Dennison shows off his skills by including the announcement of "Tony's drum part, take one" at the beginning of the closing track, "Girl at Fairgrounds," to prove that he can do a one-off just as well as anyone. That being said, these musicians in this "new lounge" trio are not virtuosos. In fact, they proclaim that, as a consequence of visiting guest musicians who handle certain parts in the studio and on stage, the three members of the band are "the three least talented people" present at any live or studio session. This fact is hard to deny, although perhaps almost as hard to accept, since their record proves their chops to be quite competent. Kentoff, Byars and Dennison are a studio group, and as such, they exchange instruments based on individual ideas, which are then put together to create a seamless collaboration on each song. Comparisons to other artists are occasionally notable; a fraction of the wide range of Beatles influences are detectable, and the guys sometimes sound not unlike their polar-coastal indie "new lounge" counterparts, Death Cab for Cutie. At times, both comparisons can be made in the same song, such as the opener, "I'll Simplify My Life (In Fremont)," featuring Ringo's beat, Lennon's piano, and Benjamin Gibbard's boyish croon. Meanwhile, "To Call Your

Very Own" resembles a lost Loud Family song. But the tone of *Verse by Verse*'s entirety comes off as something entirely their own-- one of those mixes of influences and familiar sounds that ends up surviving any likenesses and, consequently, creating originality. Now, me, I'm listening to *Verse by Verse* in my computer chair, occasionally partaking of my mug of caffeine-free Diet Coke and trying to ignore the ever-increasing carpal tunnel symptoms, as always. Yet I imagine that the recliner/window or hammock/yard scenarios-- the "new lounge"-- would be perfect for the bulk of a record like this. When I have a chance, I expect I'll try it out. And you should, too, friends, for you have witnessed the coining of a phrase that will be widely acceptable in our elite musical lexicon in no time at all. Whoever said this gig wouldn't influence people, anyway? Oh, and thanks to the Caribbean for being the effective catalyst. Nice album you got there. --Spencer Owen

**Rating: 7.8**



Picking up where their first EP left off, The Caribbean add hints of a more indie pop their sheer dreamy sound, creating an album that is an absolutely wonderful listen from start to end. This DC-area band features members of Townies and Smart Went Crazy, and their sound is an effortless blend of influences, from 60's influenced psychedelic rock to dreamy, shoegazing pop to more modern indie pop.

To say that this album is good isn't quite enough, yet describing why it's so good is a difficult task. Perhaps it's because The Caribbean don't attempt to overwhelm you with their music, instead enjoying a more laid back approach, with flowing, dreamy songs that threaten, at times, to put you in a trance. Perhaps it's because they take the quirky, retro elements of your favorite Elephant 6 bands and combine them with those dreamy sounds to create a more modern psychedelic sound. Perhaps it's because these songs will have you tapping your feet and smiling at first listen and marveling at their beauty upon repeated listens.

The album kicks off with the spacey "I'll Simplify My Life (in Fremont)," a lovely and slightly quirky pop song with plenty of piano and a kind of Elephant 6 aesthetic. "Front Row at the Rodeo" is a more upbeat track, with a lovely 70s-style guitar line and a heavily atmospheric backdrop. And perhaps the best song here, "Help Would Only Confuse Me," is formed around a basis of acoustic guitar and pure pop songwriting, ala Elliott Smith or Destroyer, but there's enough odd percussion and hints

## Delusions of Adequacy

of unique instrumentation to give the tune a playful quality. The atmospheric, lulling affect the band's earlier work was known for is laid on heavily on the beautiful title track, a song that will tempt you to hit repeat and doze off. You can sway to the laid-back and melodious "Knife Replaces Blade," with its wonderful acoustic guitar layered among keys and bass and drums, and "To Call Your Very Own" even rocks out at times, with louder drums and guitar interspersed with quieter moments and some softly spoken vocals.

With its odd, brushed drums, somber vocals, and even whistling, "I Am the Mosque" is almost haunting at times, while "What Would Jane Jacobs Say?" is bouncy and poppy in a Pavement-esque sort of way. Another favorite song, "Mancunian Candidate" has some gorgeous guitar and swirling, echoed vocals and drums for a very powerful, very soaring effect. "Girl at Fairgrounds" closes off the album with another quiet, lovely track, putting piano to good use.

I find something different to love about this album every time I listen. Depending upon my mood, I latch on to the quieter and prettier tracks that are almost hallucinogenics in their lulling quality or to the more poppy, guitar-based songs that give a nod to the Guided By Voices and Applies in Stereo folks. But all of these songs flow perfectly, with a quiet and just slightly quirky quality that makes this album wholly unique. An almost perfect release! —Jeff Marsh

With its second release, Washington, D.C., trio The Caribbean has produced a mellow, textural voyage. Verse by Verse feels like a sleepy, summer cruise perhaps ... in the Caribbean? Well, probably more like a quick get-away on the outskirts of any hip, fast-paced city. Wherever you choose to go with it, this record lets you drift away in your own dream world. "Verse by Verse" is a melodic pop album with stints of catchy, picked guitar and an abundance of tasteful, spacey keyboard effects that drape themselves and ooze over most of the songs. The entire record is tasteful and gracefully calm while consistently commanding full attention. Interesting, high-pitched percussion and synthesized tidbits lurk just behind the forefront of several tunes, always a welcome break from the rock rule that this beloved space is exclusively reserved for guitar and/or vocals. The vocal melodies are clever, unpredictable and quiet. Their understated nature rests perfect on this record, with the exception of a couple of tracks. "Front Row at the Rodeo" for one is one track where the listener could be left frustrated that the vocals have been overpowered and fade into the instrumentation of this song. This is

only a brief discouragement though, as they find their way back into clarity quickly. Michael Kentoff's voice is emotional and heavy-hearted, not by vocal power, but by the wispy tone and drifting nature of the melodies. The Caribbean is fantastic about dropping in golden nuggets of whimsical, sometimes popping, sound. The opening number, "I'll Simplify My Life (in Fremont)," floats and swirls echoing piano and surreal keyboards. A strong guitar punches in briefly mid-song, and an unexpected female vocal subtly slips in late in the song. Occasionally the group pulls the old bait-and-switch, but in a good way. Just when you expect a song to flow one path, it subtly builds itself into a bigger and bolder direction. "Help Would Only Confuse Me" is a toe-tapping ditty that begins stripped down with a rhythm guitar and drum, then builds toward a more sophisticated layering of shimmering sounds. "To Call Your Very Own" begins as if it could be a simply sweet pop tune, a la '60s sensitive pop-rockers The Left Banke, then slides into what more resembles Pavement covering The Left Banke. Don't be fooled by the dull, gray album cover. Verse by Verse is a delightfully rich full-color dream.



Desde Washington DC, desde las cenizas de bandas del underground más sabroso de aquella ciudad como Smart Went Crazy o Townies, el primer disco de THE CARIBBEAN es toda una declaración de principios articulada sobre el pop más intelectual. El mathrock abrirá paso al mathpop. Y "Verse By Verse" será el primer episodio del resto del relato. Trabajado desde diversas ciudades (por motivos de estudio y trabajo) mediante el uso y abuso del e-mail y la tecnología zip, aquí conviven once canciones de indudable arquitectura pop, que incluso puede en ocasiones remitir a bandas como R.E.M. ("Have you thought about turning pro?") si hubieran nacido en el siglo

21 y tenido todo el bagaje que se ha incorporado a la música popular en los últimos años. Pero THE CARIBBEAN pertenecen a su tiempo y plasman un sonido acaso surrealista, siempre autista, como un pop de melodía austera y andamiaje esquivo. Ellos siguen insistiendo en que sus referentes son Go-Betweens o Beach Boys, Free Design o XTC: lo cierto es que la concreción melódica de los citados es difícil de entrever en estos temas, que brillan por otras razones, como, sobre todo, por la búsqueda de una arquitectura nueva para el pop, con nuevas estructuras y nuevos materiales. No es un magnífico disco, están en ello, pero su búsqueda

dará sus frutos. Y nuestros ojos estarán para verlos.

—Jesus Castillo



**Miércoles, 14 Marzo**

