

ALBUMS

If Blue Could Be Happiness

Florist

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By Mehan Jayasuriya

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The second full-length from New York folk-pop trio Florist distills their sound to its essence. It finds beauty in simplicity and strength in fragility, full of songs that are quietly commanding.

In the overall arc of their short but productive career, Florist's debut album, 2016's *The Birds Outside Sang*, was a bit of a left turn. Written and recorded in the aftermath of a cycling accident that left songwriter Emily Sprague temporarily partially paralyzed, the

record captures the discomfort of unfamiliar terrain navigated not by choice but by necessity. Unable to play guitar, Sprague wrote most of the album using keyboards, which form the foundation for the record's claustrophobic first half. It's an album of detachment and longing, one which evokes the feeling of being held prisoner in your own broken body.

For their second album, *If Blue Could Be Happiness*, Florist have returned to their comfort zone, the sort of hushed, bedroom folk pop Sprague has been steadily refining ever since she started recording songs as a teenager. But this time, everything feels animated by a newfound clarity and focus. The band—which includes Jonnie Baker and Rick Spataro—has stripped their sound to its essence: finger-picked guitar lines, yearning vocal melodies, the soft shuffle of brushed drums. They've done away with embellishments like tape hiss and sing-alongs, and now the production feels at once more crisp and intimate.

At the center of Florist's spartan sound, Sprague is a lyricist who always sounds like a wise-beyond-her-years naturalist—a sort of upstate New York Phil Elverum in training. But here she claims that role with a previously unseen authority and purpose. When struggling to make sense of a parent's death, she seeks solace in nature's logic; when faced with everyday struggles, she finds comfort in the smallness of human affairs. There's a timeless quality to these songs that makes them feel unmoored from the current moment, a reminder that this too will pass. But Sprague still has an empathetic embrace waiting for anyone who's trying to cope during difficult times. "If you're terrified of living, like me, I hope you'll be fine," she sings on "Blue Mountain Road," "Cause we're terrified together, in this terrifying time."

Like Elverum, Sprague has a tendency to cut the most direct path as a lyricist. But on these songs, she manages to withhold her poetic impulses almost completely, as if to ask, *why wrap the world up in verse when there's so much beauty to be found in seeing it as it is?* This directness can be disarming, like on "Eyes in the Sun," where she asks, point blank, "Do you wanna join the road of my life?" She then lays it all out in just a few lines, like her hopes and fears are two sides of the same coin: "It's been a while but I'm not afraid/Of the

things that make me feel something big/Like looking at your eyes in the sun/Like looking at your eyes in the dark.”

While many of these songs could be described as minimal, they’re also musically rich. Round chords ring and synths twinkle on “Glowing Brightly,” as Sprague thumbs through the faded snapshots in her head. On the title track, the band wraps up Sprague’s gentle voice in a warm cocoon of sound. “Blue Mountain Road” opens with distant noises that bring to mind the sound of a freight train while “Instrumental 3” feels like the music you might put on in the drawing room of a creaky old house in an attempt to lure out the ghosts. Nearly all of these songs are driven by guitar lines that are simple yet memorable, a perfect match for Sprague’s earnest, plainspoken profundity.

The concept of mindfulness has become something of a trend lately, peddled by meditation apps, self-help books, and yoga classes as an antidote to the ills of an over-connected life. But a state of mind isn’t something that can be bought, it’s something that has to be earned. Sprague seems to understand this; her hard-won superpower is an ability to communicate to us the beauty and value of things that we often overlook. On these songs, she often cuts through the mind’s noise to focus on what’s right in front of her: a beam of light, a lover’s eyes, the worn texture of a cherished memory. This focus seems to have only intensified following her accident and recovery. In this regard, she brings to mind the late Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse, who, following his own brush with death, returned to his craft more present and attuned to the living things around him. Like Sparklehorse’s music, *If Blue Could Be Happiness* has the power to transform your outlook and change the trajectory of your day, if you will let it.

The album’s arresting closer, “Red Bird,” appears here in the original demo form that Sprague recorded and played for her mother on the day before she died. But even without knowing this fact, the song captures your attention. There’s something intangible and powerful at the core of it, a force you can’t quite put your finger on but which can move you to tears all the same. Sprague traces a delicate, lilting melody with her voice as strings quiver like leaves behind her, summoning a sense of longing that feels ancient and deep.

Birds have always embodied nature's wisdom in Florist's songs and here they provide comfort, a stable force in the face of impermanence and loss. "I understand the birds now that I've learned some things," Sprague sings in the song's final moments. If we stop to really listen, maybe we can, too.