

The Fiery Furnaces: *Gallowsbird Bark* Rough Trade

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An unpublished review of the Fiery Furnaces debut, 2003.



Maybe Pierre Bourdieu is right. Maybe the “field of cultural production” is nothing but a game board and each producer, promoter, buyer and seller is a piece on the board. We each fulfill our roles. The board doesn’t change much over time. Nor do the relative roles of the pieces. The game always needs someone at the top and someone at the bottom, but it also needs someone filling the various roles in between. If Bourdieu is right, we might see the Fiery Furnaces as the contemporary occupiers of the space once held by Joseph Byrd’s the United States of America. In 1968 the United States of America grated against the outer extremities of rock music, integrating sources as diverse as 19th century folk forms, Sousa-esque brass arrangements and experimental analog electronics (Gordon Marron is credited with playing ring modulator) into an *au courant* blend of pastoral psychedelia, blues, and proto-acid guitar leads.

With their debut, *Gallowsbird’s Bark*, the Fiery Furnaces chafe against the current state of the art, interpolating 19th century folk forms, dada lyrics, and splice and dice arrangements into an *au courant* mix of earnest sonics, postmodern cool and post-acid guitar leads. So there we have it: neatly bundled and tied in a fancy French bow.

But Bourdieu's system fails to account for a few alternatives to this neat bundle. The Fiery Furnaces are Eleanor and Matthew Friedberger: brother and sister (like the White Stripes?), duo (like the White Stripes, the Kills, and Quasi), and from New York City (like you name it). The Fiery Furnaces, then, are also part of a moment, a *modus operandi*, and a place. I have wondered if the current comfort level with duos behaving like bands has something to do with the rise of electronica. As we've all grown more accustomed to seeing one or two people on stage using pre-recorded sound sources to affect rooms full of people, has the seeming necessity to compromise creatively, organizationally and personally with a full band's worth of members disappeared? Is this a good thing? Are these sacrifices and the socialization they impose on musicians a valuable component of the music they make? (Another time perhaps.)

The Fiery Furnaces could also be seen as part of a trend toward a nostalgic recuperation of American history. Such a trend can incorporate the work of artists as diverse as The Silver Jews and Matmos. The swingin' sixties to which these artists relate is as likely to be the 1860s as the 1960s. One finds both lyrical and musical reference to a (presumably) post-emancipation world of rural simplicity and of a social order in the midst of restoration. Thus the Fiery Furnaces' lyrics, delivered in a plain, assiduous alto by Eleanor, make frequent reference to north and south, hot and cold, home and away. On their surface, many of the songs conjure the repetitive structure and recurrent themes of folk ballads. But lurking beneath both content and form, is a knowing, contemporary cosmopolitanism populated by the Millenium Dome, Swingline staplers, Suicide-esque synths (very hip again), and a certain tendency toward deconstruction more wholly embraced by the likes of Captain Beefheart or US Maple.

All this description may bring the potential listener no closer to the reality of *Gallowsbird's Bark*. But that's the point. Unlike much of the recidivist, duo, rock and roll splattering out and around the Detroit/NYC axes, the Fiery Furnaces' music can't be reasonably reconstructed from descriptions of it. *Gallowsbird's Bark* is the result of a cross-pollination which breeds cross-purposes. The Fiery Furnaces straddle several positions on the game board, rendering the board itself suspect.