**Shearwater**

***Jet Plane and Oxbow***

Release date: January 22nd, 2016

*Jet Plane and Oxbow*, Shearwater’s second original full-length for Sub Pop, is their career-defining album—the leap forward those of us who’ve been watching them for years have always believed they would make. Lush, powerful, and grand, with a confident edge heard more often in their live shows than on record, it feels like the musical statement they’ve been working toward through five albums and a decade on the road. It’s an album that captures the light and darkness of our time through the lens of one of our most unique and, for a growing number of ardent fans, treasured bands.

This is definitely Shearwater’s loudest record; it’s easy to imagine these songs roaring from the stage. But it’s also, strangely, their most intricate and beautiful one. Front man Jonathan Meiburg and producer/engineer Danny Reisch (who also recorded 2012’s *Animal Joy* and the off-the-cuff collaborations of 2014’s *Fellow Travelers*)spent two years crafting *Jet Plane and Oxbow* in studios in Austin and Los Angeles, with help from drummer Cully Symington, longtime Shearwater associates Howard Draper and Lucas Oswald, and tourmates Abram Shook, Jesca Hoop and Jenn Wasner.

But their secret weapon this time is film composer and percussionist Brian Reitzell, whose credits include *The Virgin Suicides, Lost in Translation, The Bling Ring,* and *30 Days of Night*. Reitzell’s arsenal of strange instruments and equipment emphasizes the album’s cinematic depth and scope, and reflects the band’s choice to anchor the record in the era when digital technology was just beginning to transform the world of recorded music. In Shearwater’s hands, this doesn’t feel like nostalgia; the racing synths and hammered dulcimers of heart-pounding opener “Prime” or the addled motorik of “Radio Silence” sound more like a metaphor for our own technologically bewildered moment.

Lyrically, Meiburg describes *Jet Plane and Oxbow* as a protest record (see attached interview); the title comes from a moment when he looked out of a 737 as another plane, passing below, bisected a loop of the Mississippi. In recent years, Meiburg’s been working as a writer as well as a musician, but he doesn’t seem distracted here; in fact, he’s never sounded more *present* on record. His voice is urgent, angry, and tender by turns, and the songs are as multi-layered as the production. “Quiet Americans”, the obvious single, wraps a deep ambivalence inside a call to arms; “Only Child”, perhaps the most straightforward song Meiburg’s ever written, is shot through with warmth even as it describes a life fracturing under pressure. And though the album begins in close-up: (*and you were lying on your back in the grass/counting backward from a thousand)* it ends wide, as “Stray Light at Clouds Hill” evokes the dark side of the earth—luminous, eerie, and vast. Shearwater have always worked on a huge canvas, but with *Jet Plane and Oxbow*, their reach finally equals their grasp.

Shearwater begin touring in Europe in February 2016, and the United States in March.

**Michael Azerrad vs. Jonathan Meiburg**

**on** *Jet Plane and Oxbow*

**Topics discussed include:**

*Caller ID as a letdown*

*Bowie’s New Year’s resolutions*

*“Double Dutch Bus” and “Double Dutch”*

Superman III

*Technology in music*

*“Checking Out the Checkout Girl”*

*Knowing your fallout shelter*

*The fate of the sun*

**MICHAEL AZERRAD:** Hello?

**JONATHAN MEIBURG:** Hi, Michael.

**MA:** You know, I have to admit I miss not knowing who was calling when the phone rang.  I like clinging to the fiction that I don’t know who it is.

**JM:** It’s true. “Hello” really used to be a question.  It’s strange to remember that time so clearly, since it already seems so far away!  The other day, I saw a list of New Year’s resolutions David Bowie published in 1980—one, by the way, was his intention to be 67 years old by 1990.

**MA:** I happen to be pretty good at arithmetic and I could have told him that wasn't going to happen.

**JM:**—but the one that really struck me was “to own a print of *Eraserhead*.”  Not so much because it’s *Eraserhead*, but because the idea of owning a personal copy of a cult film, that you could watch anytime you wanted, still seemed extravagant then.  Even for someone who liked being ahead of his time.

**MA:** He was on Broadway back then, wasn’t he, playing the Elephant Man? That would have been about the time *Scary Monsters* came out, I guess.

**JM:**You were living in New York then?

**MA:** Yes.  It was a hairier place then, but it was also a great time for New York music.  I’m not saying that out of nostalgia, by the way—I think now’s a great time for New York music too.  But it was just different then.  Now there’s this idea that punk was the only ‘real’ thing happening then, the CBGB thing, or No Wave—and that was exciting, it was great—but there were all kinds of other musical avenues opening up too, around then.  I’m thinking about how in the summers there were these great, sort of viral hits you’d hear all over the place, booming out of cars and boomboxes and bodegas, and some of them were really rough and ready, homemade things. Like Frankie Smith’s “Double Dutch Bus”—you ever hear that one?

**JM:** “Gimme a *HOOOO* if you got your funky bus fare!”

**MA:** Yeah! There was a wonderfully oddball, slapdash feeling to a lot of it, even some big records.  I think I still have one of the straw hillbilly hats they used in the video for Malcolm McLaren’s “Buffalo Gals” buried in my closet.  I wore it home on the subway and I heard this one older gentleman say to his friend, "Now that's a *real* homeboy hat."

**JM:** Speaking of “Buffalo Gals” and double dutch—I was listening to McLaren’s “Double Dutch” the other day and was blown away by what a wild mashup that song is. The Mahotella Queens, the disco strings, the handclaps, the rope-whooshing sounds, and Malcolm sort of awkwardly sing-talking his way over the top of it with total, oblivious confidence.

**MA:** Confidence will get you everywhere.

**JM:** It’s got a great video, too. I like it better than *Graceland*.

**MA:** Me too. Hey, aren’t we supposed to be talking about your record?

**JM:** Ha, yes! But I think the early 1980s are a good place to start from, in a way.  When I was writing the songs I was listening to a lot of records from around that time—like *Scary Monsters*, which you mentioned, or *My Life In the Bush of Ghosts*, or *Big Science*, or Peter Gabriel’s *Melt* record, or PiL's *Metal Box*.

**MA:** I definitely heard all those in this record—also *Remain in Light* and Talk Talk's *The Colour of Spring*.  But no offense, I don't actually hear any *Metal Box*.

**JM:** Danny wasn’t going to let me go there, which is probably a good thing.  That’s such a mesmerizing album though. I snuck in a lyrical nod to it in one of the songs.

**MA:** Maybe that’s part of what I like about your record. It’s certainly not a period re-creation, but it has a resonance, for me, with that time.  It looks back, but it also looks forward.

**JM:** You ever see that performance PiL did on *American Bandstand*?  Where they barely even pretended to play “Poptones” and started running around the studio, and Dick Clark was like, “who’s this asshole?”

**MA:** When it was broadcast!  Back then you had to be paying attention or you missed everything.  But why that time?  Why those records?  It’s not like nostalgia for your teenage years. More like nostalgia for *my* teenage years.

**JM:** Well—I like thinking about what the sounds of that time must have meant in context. They definitely give me the sense of being at a crossroads, of a revolution brewing just offstage, and I think that’s at least in part because digital recording gear was just starting to hit its stride: Eventide harmonizers, Linn drums, early samplers and delays—stuff that must have seemed like the coastline of an exciting new world, inhabited by new species of music.  But MIDI hadn’t reared its head yet, or some of the other gadgets that started to make everything so crispy and mechanical-sounding a few years later. You still needed to have musicians who could play, and listen.  Is any of this actually true, by the way, or am I just projecting?

**MA:** It's funny, because I was just thinking that at the time lots of people were saying that the stuff you're talking about meant that musicians didn't have to listen or know how to play.  Now they say that about laptop music.  *Plus ça change*… but I take it that the technology you’re talking about played an important role in *Jet Plane and Oxbow*?

**JM:** Danny, who I mentioned, Danny Reisch, produced and engineered the record. We’ve worked together for the past couple of years—he also played drums on our tours—and we’ve gotten really dialed in to each other’s strengths and flaws, so there’s a lot we don’t need to explain to each other. But we started this record by setting some ground rules, and one of them was to lean as much as we could on instruments and gear from that era, as long we didn’t veer off into pastiche.

**MA:** Such as?

**JM:** Rototoms!

**MA:** Oh, God. Possibly the most maligned percussion instrument in musical history.  Although they were somewhat redeemed by their appearance on Wazmo Nariz's classic 1979 single "Checking Out the Checkout Girl."

**JM:** Believe me, I was skeptical, too—but it turns out they can be great with the right drummer, especially if you put fiber-skin heads on them and not those plastic ones they come with.  I also mostly played a strat this time instead of the older hollow-body I used on the last few albums, and I fell in love with a beautiful little synth called a Korg Lambda; it’s the first sound you hear on the record. We also spent some time doing overdubs and treatments with Brian Reitzell in LA. He mostly does film scores, but also he used to play drums for Air and Redd Kross.

**MA:** Now, that's what I call a versatile drummer.

**JM:** I think he enjoyed working on something that wasn’t tracked to picture. But he reveres that era of recording we’re talking about, and a bit further back, too; he got me into Takemitsu and that mind-bending Tangerine Dream record *Zeit*.  With Brian, we were trying to nudge the record toward that world, toward that kind of beauty, and menace.

**MA:** ‘Menace’ is an apt word. There was certainly a lot of it in the air in 1980. Carter reinstated the draft, Reagan got elected, John Lennon got shot, and New York City was a pretty scary place.  Everybody thought Reagan was going to start World War III.  Did you know where the fallout shelter was in your school?

**JM:**I did.  And thinking back, I guess Baltimore would have been vaporized along with DC if the Soviets nuked us, so the end would have been quick for my first-grade class, no matter where we cowered in the building!  But I also think of it as a time—I mean, these are really early memories, but they’re deeply embedded—I remember a feeling that technology was about to change everything about life as we knew it. Voyager was sending back pictures of Jupiter and Saturn.  *The Empire Strikes Back* was in the theaters, and then *E.T.* made all my friends want a Speak and Spell.  We were fascinated by computers, but we didn’t really know what they were, so they seemed capable of anything. Remember *Superman III*, where Richard Pryor builds an evil computer that wants to destroy the world?

**MA:** In retrospect, that's a visionary film about cyber-terrorism.  Now computers actually *are* capable of anything.

**JM:**Yeah—Bowie could stick a few hi-res copies of *Eraserhead* on a thumb drive and toss it in his sock drawer. But maybe what appeals to me most about looking back to that era is that I feel like we’re in a parallel time now. Technology seems magical again in the way it did when I was a little kid, but it’s also scarier than ever.  People can tinker with the actual DNA of living things. The NSA can watch drone feeds of your house on their lunch breaks.  Soldiers in the Nevada desert can kill people on the other side of the world by pressing a button.  It’s hard to tell where legitimate concern ends and paranoia begins.

**MA:** And legitimate concerns are routinely denounced as paranoia. You're right about the parallels with this time—for instance, the Russians are making an encore performance as international heavies.  And as far as technology goes—have you seen the promos for that Soylent stuff?

**JM:** “What if you never had to worry about food again”?

**MA:** I see things like that and I think: *we are doomed*.

**JM:** Me too.  And I’d be lying if I said that feeling wasn’t there in the record.  But I was also trying to look beyond it, because in the end all that dread and anxiety only gets you so far; the song “Backchannels” is sort of an attempt to meet that head-on.  Not to get too cosmic about it, but, you know, eventually the sun will expand till it’s right where you and I are sitting, no matter what we do or don’t do, and at least it’s better to be alive *at* the end than *after* the end, you know?  The guy who did the neon work for the cover said that people ask him all the time if he worries about working in a dying medium—and he said, “I’m like, well, I’m also in this dying *body*, in a dying *city*, on a dying *planet..*.”

[both laugh]

**MA:** Why are we laughing…

**JM:** Why are we laughing about this?  I know! I guess sometimes the truth is like a hit of oxygen, or maybe nitrous, even when it’s grim.  But that’s just the backdrop to life; it’s our fantasies that show you who we really are.  I remember watching the Baltimore Aquarium being built back when I was a kid, this giant, earthbound space station of concrete and neon and glass, full of escalators and dark passageways and glowing fish, and the shining pyramid on top with a rain forest in it, and thinking *this is the future!*  I was so excited about growing up in that future, you know?

**MA:** Now it’s yesterday’s future.

**JM:** Just like today’s will be tomorrow.  Did you ever see Arthur Russell perform, by the way?

**MA:** No. It was just as possible to miss great stuff then as it is now.

**JM:** Are you saying that to make me feel better?

**MA:** Maybe!  My guess is fewer people will miss this record than you might think.  Speaking for myself, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you sound so extroverted—I can see you singing these songs to stadiums full of people, with one foot up on the monitor.

**JM:** Is that a good thing?

**MA:** In this context, yeah.  I felt like you were reaching out with this record, making something really big, in a way I hadn’t quite heard from you before.  As the kids would say, it's "epic."

**JM:** I think I have to make peace with that word. As long as it means “the record offers you a sonic landscape that rewards repeat listens”, which is something I’m always striving for, I’m OK with it. This one definitely has some of my proudest recorded moments, like that solo at the end of “Filaments”.

**MA:** What *is* that, by the way?

**JM:** It’s a guitar. I promise!

**MA:** It's very Adrian Belew.  Of all these songs, “Quiet Americans” sounds most like a hit to me, or your version of a hit, more than any other Shearwater song I’ve heard.  It’s hard for me to get it out of my head.  And I think I know what it means, but what does it mean to you?

**JM:** My idea for *Jet Plane and Oxbow* was to try to make a protest record that wasn’t dumb or preachy.  Which was sometimes hard to reconcile with how much fun it was to do!  But the more grand or triumphant the songs sounded, the more conflicted the lyrics became, which I really liked. I listened to it the other day for the first time since we mastered it and it reminded me of a breakup letter—the kind that’s furious and tender at the same time, because it’s written with love.

**MA:** Wow, who are you breaking up with?

**JM:** Good question…the United States, I guess, though that sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud.  Maybe the *idea* of the United States.  Some of the things we like to tell ourselves about ourselves.  I’m as guilty of that as the next person, by the way; I’m not saying I’m the guy who sees it all clearly.  I don’t know if anybody really can.

**MA** [in his best Bowie]: "I'm afraid of Americans!" But it can’t really be a breakup, can it?  Because in a breakup you walk away, and you’re not leaving… are you?

**JM:** That’s the thing. I can’t stop being an American, even when it makes my skin crawl. I also can’t help loving it here, even though I hate it sometimes, too. And I don’t think I’m the only one here who feels like this. So in the end, I guess, the record felt like a way for me to send out a little beacon that just says “You’re not alone.”  In the tense, polarized, tech-addled—but still very beautiful—world we’re in, I don’t think anyone can hear that enough.

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