

The Snarlin' Yarns – Break Your Heart

written by Guest Contributor | August 17, 2020



Although it was recorded in summer 2019, [Break Your Heart](#), the debut record by The Snarlin' Yarns, feels utterly of this moment where “every second’s about a thousand years / and every minute’s just a great big blur / and every hour is a furor / and every day is the end times.” On *Break Your Heart*, the Ogden, Utah group—self-described as “the country’s only punk-country-bluegrass-folkie-improv-poetry-high&lonesome band”—serves up a ball of delightfully capacious and tangled narratives encompassing office romances, creation myths, debauched lumber barons, seventeen-year cicadas, the apocalypse, pharmacy girls, and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

From the first moments of “If I Go,” a galloping call-and-response led by vocalist and fiddle player Mara Brown, The Snarlin' Yarns' collaborative spirit is evident. There's no discernible hierarchy among the band members, which allows for a continuously evolving configuration of voices and instrumentation. On top of this sturdy foundation, poet and linguistic contortionist Abraham Smith spins fully improvised spoken-word passages. Hence the Yarns' motto: “Never the same snarl twice.” From the conflicted romance of “If I Go,” the first side of the album takes us through the road-weary lullaby of “Rest Stop,” a latter-day Odyssey that promises that “the road will take you / the road will remake you.” The nervous stomp of “Pharmacy Girl” captures the anxiety of a secret infatuation, while Smith's double-time spoken-word part ratchets up the tension. The jaunty “Wyoming State of Mind,” buoyed by Jason Barrett-Fox's banjo and William Pollett's wailing vocals, is a kind of creation myth, while Smith's bear imagery resonates nicely with his poem “let fly all” from the recent chapbook [Bear Lite Inn](#). In the just-released music video for “Wyoming State of Mind,” Deb Davidovits' shadow puppetry magic transforms the band into silhouettes set loose among the Cowboy State's iconic wildlife. Davidovits' minimalistic imagery with its element of storybook mystery is a perfect complement to the song. “[Don't Go Fishin'](#),” the record's first single, is a highly danceable

cautionary tale about the drudgery of office romance.

Break Your Heart hits its high point in the queasy swing of "DWI," the only track that features Smith on lead vocals. The song's narrative traces the speaker's slow-motion disintegration as he "lost it all to gin, lost it all to beer" and is condemned to the dreaded "Gerard Hotel." Smith's great talent both on paper and on wax is the ease with which he toggles between language as semantic content and language as pure material. "DWI" accomplishes this when Smith announces, "I went to AA / then I went to AAA." We watch in real-time as repetition hollows out the acronym's meaning and it devolves into a tragicomic yelp: "then I went to AA-AAA-AAAA." Perhaps "DWI" feels like such a high point because it deviates from the song structure that most of the record follows. Instead of bookending the spoken-word piece with conventional verses and chorus, Smith is given free rein across the entire track—the manic bacchanalian narrative takes over and the rest of the band provides the chorus. Smith's voice itself lends each song its peculiar punctum. From one moment to the next, its warbly grain falls somewhere between the tender fragility of Bonnie "Prince" Billy and the preacherly swagger of Slim Cessna. His voice is eccentric in the geometrical sense of the word—it strains at its orbit, it circles a note, it flies off the handle.

The album drags a bit on the back end; Smith's absence is conspicuous on "Applesauce," but Brown's knife-edged fiddle line carries the song through. Like "Wyoming State of Mind," "Star Valley Skies" is a site-specific love letter to the West, but its plodding rhythm and exaggerated vocals stray a bit too far into Bob Seger territory. The highlight of "Star Valley Skies" is the story of Grandpa with his "pints of something," pointing out constellations to his grandson (the poems in *Bear Lite Inn* often feature a grandpa figure as well).

One of the most striking things about the interplay between Smith's improvisations and the musicianship of Barrett-Fox, Brown, and Pollett is the surprising juxtapositions in tone and content that the song structures allow. "Butcher Girl" is the best example—the horny midtempo stomp led by Barrett-Fox narrates the danger and allure of the "butcher girl" who "carved him up." However, Smith's improvisation dips into darker territory, as the butcher girl yearns for "the winsome good old days when the acid rain rained." Like his poems, Smith's lyrics offer a compelling alloy of surrealism, sincerity, and danger, as seen in the Butcher Girl's imperialistic commentary on her trade: "she would talk about gristle as my missile overseas / ah that missile trained on a playground / where they're rolling mud around." The poignancy of the missile aimed at a playground alongside the Butcher Girl's cartoonish carnal obsession conjures a weird affect that lingers long after the song ends.

Break Your Heart sends us off with the gently elegiac singalong "Tide So Low." Brown's chorus anchors the song: "Tide so low it'll break your heart / end of the day has come / it's a new day and a new town / I'll never forget your love." When Smith comes in, his improvisation circles around the phrase "shake it off," uttered to a punch-drunk daughter, an old wet dog, and finally the speaker himself "laying here in bed tonight trying to shake you off / would that I were an Etch-A-Sketch shaking you off." It's a strange

image in a heartbreaking song, but the Etch-A-Sketch might actually be the perfect metaphor for The Snarlin' Yarns. With its ethos of improvisation, collaboration, and "never the same snarl twice," *Break Your Heart* showcases The Snarlin' Yarns' aptitude for balancing endings with beginnings, apocalypses with renewals. It is a record that arrives just in time.

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