

GRAILS

Red Light

Grails is evocative, sinuous and unpredictable -- like all great music should be. So, it stands to reason that nearly everything written about the instrumental band's music expounds on how much it reminds listeners of particular experiences, sights, moods, dreams... People react emotionally to the Portland, OR quintet's powerfully evocative songs because they compel us to fill the gap between music and language. To quote one 20th Century sage, "instrumental music is Total Music." There's no voice to quaintly tell us how we should *feel*, only the emotive musical force moving us to understand and empathize.

The anxious tension, extreme dynamics and urgent tone of Grails' second album *Red Light* seems to briefly glance back upon the rather lush and even-keeled feel of its debut *The Burden of Hope* (often compared to Godspeed You Black Emperor, Dirty Three)...and then torches the path it has traveled.

One part Miles Davis' smoldering ferocity on *Bitches Brew*, one part Mussorgsky's stirring anthems, one part Pink Floyd's haunted lucidity, one part Dirty Three's epic grandeur and one part pure desperation, *Red Light* burns with an intensity of emotional expression and impeccable musicianship. It is the sound of ritual; of that urge for cathartic transcendence so often sought through layers of volume and distortion -- yet rendered with dramatic dynamics using only violin, guitar, piano and drums.

Grails began in the late 90's as a bedroom recording project of guitarist Alex Hall. He had done his tour of duty in the local underground punk scene and decided the world had enough bands. So, he kept his music to himself. But drummer and housemate Emil Amos (also of Holy Sons) encouraged Hall to assemble a band and perform some of the mini-symphonies in public. A small collective of talented local musicians -- violinist Timothy Horner, a Jackie-O Motherfucker alum; classically trained pianist/bassist William Slater; and second guitarist Zak Riles, also of Harbor -- was assembled under the moniker Laurel Canyon (before the film of the same name was released) to play a couple of one-off shows. The reaction to the performances was so strong that a band was born despite itself.

Laurel Canyon recorded and self-released two EPs in 2000 and 2001 on Pamlico Sounds, played just a couple of shows and soon had stoic Swans/Angels of Light auteur Michael Gira asking them to open for his band. On a whim, Hall sent an unsolicited CD to Neurot Recordings and shortly thereafter was quite surprised to hear from Neurosis guitarist/vocalist and label co-owner Steve Von Till offering to sign the band. The label predicated upon releasing music primarily by artists within its tight-knit family of like-minded iconoclasts (not just any band sending a demo) was so moved by the music, Von Till invited the inchoate band to join the roster.

Everything fell into place quickly, as if the music was guiding itself. *The Burden of Hope* was released under the group's new name, Grails in 2003. It was received with some of the most peculiar enthusiasm -- inspiring critics to react with such emotional candor, it's surprising that anything written about Grails even mentions the music itself!



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Nonetheless, where that album ebbed and flowed, *Red Light* simmers and erupts with evermore moving dynamism and raw emotion. Sure, there's much to be said of *Red Light*...the album is bound to inspire thousands of thoughts and memories. But, may we humbly request at least *some* mention of the music when describing the evocative force of Grails.

