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DIRTY PROJECTORS

dreaming is free



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Dirty Projectors are the band your subconscious has been waiting for, updating the interpretation of dreams with fantasy art and otherworld music that sprawls from classical to rock to whatever

Words: [kicking.k](#)
Photography: [Steve Double](#)



"The first time I saw him perform, I was really moved. He was solo – dressed all in white and singing a cappella – and then he jumped up into the rafters and wrapped himself around a beam. Someone in the crowd handed him a nylon-string guitar and he just kind of serenaded the room from the ceiling..." (Amber Coffman, guitarist, Dirty Projectors)

in which the scene is set, approximately

You may or may not have already met Dave Longstreth, whose band Dirty Projectors has recently piqued some pixel inches with their latest, unashamedly conceptual project – a song-by-song recreation of Black Flag's *Damaged* (from memory). It's a radical reimagining rooted in half-remembered fragments, otherworldly where the original aimed for bitter realism, breaking open the arrangements to let the light in.

What you may not know (yet) is that *Rise Above* is their seventh record in almost as many incarnations, that these have included a 'glitch-opera' and effusive use of Esperanto, and that Longstreth – the one constant in the career-deep mix of jury-rigged classicism, wondrous, cross-bred exotica and an urge to thus recapture the shock of the new – is as likely to draw inspiration from SWV as he is Wagner, Mohammed Moog as Tool.

The first time I met him was pre-show, a clear, November early eve. He was rocking a rakish New Age Olde Worlde Errol Flynn moustache, jittering energy and an Xmas-pattern hoodie – I was asking him about his childhood, he amazed I had no idea where Connecticut (his home state) was (and perhaps amused I neither care much). He admitted that he got into what we might queasily term alternative music late and at a remove (with no local scene). Growing up, he joined his parents in their well-tempered passion for classical music and (brace yourself) bird-watching. I didn't think people *did* that in America, I said, ignorantly but honestly.

"They do! They really do. Until I was like 13, I would get up with them on Saturday mornings with my binoculars and stuff. That was my finch phase."

In an article that is so much about memory, it may seem symbolically heavy-handed that my dictaphone managed to not record the first half hour of our conversation – please direct any criticism to Sony, Japan. In the meanwhile, I can at least list what we're missing:

1. The details of his course at Yale (assorted learned and historical syllabi, but most especially composers and their innovations). 2. The significant silence when I say, So, you were a square kid...? 3. Dave's obvious and touching respect for his older brother (although this didn't stop him swiping his copy of *Damaged*). 4. Our polite disagreement over the relative sales of The Eagles and Michael Jackson (in retrospect, Wikipedia adjudges me the winner).

Toward the end of our time together, I ostentatiously brought out a string of questions previously posed to Black Flag. It was mostly just fun for us. (What do you think of the current American hardcore scene? "It's bogus." Is bogus good or bad? "Bad." That's what Rollins said as well!)

But there was one telling moment, too: I asked Dave, as Greg Ginn before him: Does yr attitude come from being bitter, or realistic? He allowed his eyes to drift to the ceiling: "It has to do with believing in impossible dreams."

Let's move on.

The Glad Fact (2003). "Disaffected by the lack of existential depth in Yale university freshmen, holes up solo with cassette eight-track in dorm room. Hooded at all hours. Never emerges but in song!"

Or, increasingly, in his holidays: "I lived in Portland basically whenever I wasn't at Yale. If a musician has a kind of spiritual home, mine wouldn't be Brooklyn, it would be Portland. So

many amazing people from that place have inspired me – Adam Forkner, Steve Schroeder, Jona Bechtolt, Marianna Ritchey, Andrew Kaffer, Khaela Maricich: Google these people," he writes to me.

Carrying over his increasing integration to the lo-tech/no-budget conceptual artmusik so prevalent in the Pacific Northwest, once exiled again in academia, he persuaded assorted music students to play parts for his next project, heroically bestowing the name The Orchestral Society for the Preservation of the Orchestra upon the part-time assemblage and amassing their fragments on...

Slaves' Graves (And Ballads) (2004). "An orchestral suite, modelled more or less strictly on the songs of Gustav Mahler, like *Kindertotenlieder* ('Songs On The Deaths Of Children') and the orchestral lo-fi of Phil Elvrum, who absolutely was/is the Woody Guthrie of our micro-generation. Lyrics involve extended metaphor between American land use (go forth and subdue it!) and the desertification of the soul."

Gradually gaining a higher profile as his records filtered out, and touring besides, Dave Longstreth's worlds were refusing to cohere. He was starting to listen to music outside of classic or indie. He was thinking about finches, and cars, Aztecs and oil and Don Henley. He quit Yale.

in which the curtains fall away

"The first time I ever saw Dave was when I was over at his house and he'd just gotten back from the tour – he was wearing a big green army jacket and glasses, and I was like: that's Dave. I just knew it was him. My first impression was that he was very... energetic. I may have seen a picture, but I knew him

'I sometimes can't tell the difference between what sounds good and what sounds different'

as the one person who lived there that was never there..." (Angel Deradoorian, bass, Dirty Projectors)

Where was I? Oh yeah, Don Henley (played by Dave Longstreth) frogjumps from treetop to starry sky, his cape scrolling out behind him, his movements mannered like a player-controlled character (which oddly only increases yr identification with him). Elsewhere, this lo-res fantasia will take in a Hokusai-styled village (inhabited by civilised cicadas), syncopated jump-cuts and epic historical struggles (Gettysburg and Tenochtitlan) simplified into emblematic fight sequences.

See, Dave's latest collaborator wasn't a musician at all, but an animator, James Sumner (www.vsanna.com). "He showed me these really simple Flash animations that he had been doing in his spare time – a skeleton going, 'arrgh!' or something..." And it was the coolest thing you'd ever seen. "Exactly. Exactly. I gave him a demo and we spent a lot of hours talking."

See, Dave's latest project was an eco-parable DVD and OST he took to calling a 'glitch-opera'. Of the film's almost poetic RPG aesthetic: "James was trying to think of a visual language that would correspond to the music."

Good luck. Otherworldly choirs flow like unfathomable rivers through approximate clusters of metallic beats where rhythm meets melody, strings which sift like light. And everywhere, his voice threading and unfurling, dancing kite-like as cattle-cry horns repeat, obsessive, almost trance-like guitar arabesques, even figures that seem transported from a waltz. Handclaps, fingerclicks, bass-swaddled beats which shift

their weight like r'n'b choreography. Deliberate glitches. Beautiful malfunctions.

Welcome to *The Getty Address* (2005). "The idea was a sweeping myth that could encompass most of the knowledge and feelings I had accumulated, like a *Pet Sounds* kind of naïve ambition." Angel: "I had no idea what it was going to sound like – they just busted into some groove and I was like, holy shit, this band are *African*."

"I was just getting bored with indie rock on the one hand and, y'know, *old* music..." Dave sighs, "I really started to get into the gamelan and African guitar styles – part of what is appealing about music from non-Western traditions is how poorly I understand them. Isn't it inspiring to pass from ignorance to some kind of understanding? The object of study seems to change shape and acquire dimension in front of your eyes..."

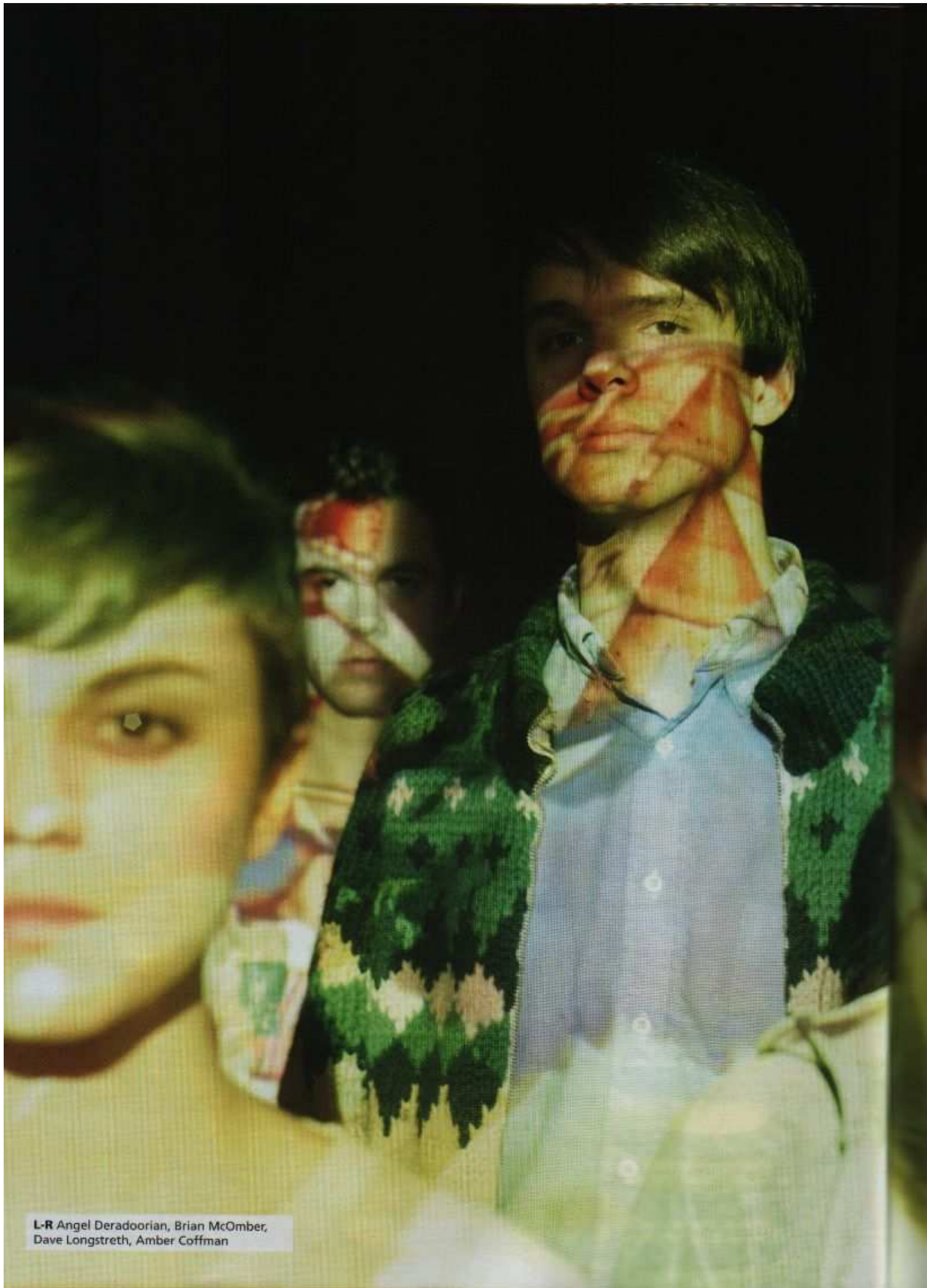
More than this, his musicological background prompted him to unearth analogies between genre and instrumentation from vastly disconnected times and places: "And that seemed to me to be this weird, beautiful mystery... the way I think about it is exposing the common traits that draw different styles together." In recording this unexpected conflux, he twinned fastidious classical playing and the brutality with which the computer can so entirely capture and almost possess it – the machine in the ghost – and, for good measure, lyrics from America's best-selling record, but *not* the world's (ref. Wikipedia), *The Eagles Greatest Hits Vol 1*. ("There are no direct quotes because I modulated the vowel sounds so the language was dreamier: like, "Ga da wuor la trubae lune" equals "Got a world of trouble on my mind".) Well, *duh*.

Speaking as someone who is roundly ribbed at the *Plan B* office for my hapless devotion to music out of Portland (see above) and Brooklyn (where the band are currently based) and as a control freak who can't help but second-guess my readers, I know what you're thinking. And you're wrong. Concept album(s), yes. Prog, no.

Dirty Projectors and their peers have more common call with the playfulness of conceptual art than they do the self-hating/defeating classicism of progressive rock's demand to be taken seriously – mirroring the way in which postmodernism in general would rather play with the ridiculousness of even supposed high art and true sentiment, dragging everything into one primordial swamp of mixed signals and cognitive dissonance. "Yeah," says Dave, "One isn't worth more than the other." So there. Where were we?

Oh yeah. So, soon he assembled a touring band to road-test the songs. They weren't showing the film during the show – "It required a bit of imagination" – but Dave noticed more and more people were approaching him afterward, offering support and even, increasingly, pledging collaboration: "I've noticed this happens to some people – *The Getty Address* becomes like a world for them..."

When I ask Dave why he didn't do all this experimentalism within the grant-fed world of high art, he shifts from affably reclined to upright and engaged: "I'm into inspiration, I'm into *new vibes*. It just doesn't seem like the people who are involved in classical music are, at all. They're curators and caretakers: it's all just so buttoned-down, y'know? There's no sweat and confusion."



L-R Angel Deradoorian, Brian McOmber,
Dave Longstreth, Amber Coffman

There'd be plenty of both (sorry, hack-y) as Dave toured a new EP, fittingly titled 'New Attitude' (2006): "That's when I got really into playing live. I wish we had a really good live recording of that period, but alas. That band – Spencer Kingman, Will Glass, Nat Baldwin, and Alex Farrill – was the prototype for the band I have now."

in which the audience invade the stage

"I was probably in four bands at the time – trying to play with as many people as possible, but Dave was a really unique performer and composer, and I made it my priority to get in that band. Our first interaction was really funny because I work in evolutionary biology, so we just started talking about science..." (Brian McOmber, drums, Dirty Projectors)

Post-show. We're in the hysterically petite changing room. Bunched against door, perched on chair or down on floor, are the band he has now: Amber Coffman (watercolour eyes, polite smiles), Brian McOmber (tallish, amiable gravitas) and Angel Deradoorian (black curls crowned with a cap, sardonic chutzpah). Dirty Projectors circa 2007, "and for the foreseeable future."

Talking about *The Getty Address* and the ever-wider musical net he was casting, Dave mused, "It's like imagining a community that doesn't exist yet." Supporting his point, all the current members made this transition from fan to bandmate – and, increasingly, their input is having an impact. "Little things have evolved," says Amber, modestly. Dave: "I sometimes can't tell the difference between what sounds good and what sounds different."

Amber: "When we joined the band, and he was teaching us parts, he always compared what he

"A lot of people ask me about, like, the violence of Black Flag, the testosterone of that music, and say, 'Where did that go?' And that never even occurred to me. I guess I find talking about emotions in music really tricky. It's like – the colour of the sky."

What I remembered about *Damaged* was not anger, but a sense of yearning. And this desire for...um...something. Like, growth, or change, or difference.

"That first generation of punk and DIY culture in America's had this feeling of, we're not represented. We wanna represent ourselves. We can bring something new into the world right now, and we can do it ourselves. I thought it would be sort of ironic to create something new out of something old."

Has there been any word from anyone in the Black Flag camp?

"The American record label that put out *Rise Above* was paranoid about that. They really thought..." Henry Rollins might kick yr ass... "That's what Amber was worried about."

How about feedback from anyone in the punk/hardcore community?

"We were shown a blog, by hardcore kids from Jersey, saying, 'That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard'. And we've gotten messages saying, 'I hope someone firebombs your mother's retirement home' – pretty predictable shit..."

His forcefield quavers a moment. "I'm used to people's reactions having more to do with confusion or befuddlement or whatever than the way I would think they would," he cedes.

If they weren't much likely to adopt the concept, I'd love to be (cliché ahead) a fly (holy shit!) on the

'Part of what is appealing about music from non-Western traditions is how poorly I understand them. Isn't it inspiring to pass from ignorance to understanding?'

wanted to something really absurd –"

Brian: "One time, for 'Thirsty And Miserable', he wanted something really delicate and fragile like Cyndi Lauper's 'Time After Time' – which has now evolved into complete *blasting*, through playing it live."

(A cross-section of Dave's listening habits, as reported in a previous online interview: Mariah Carey *Mariah Carey*, Mariah Carey *Emotions*, Mariah Carey *Daydream*, Mariah Carey *Merry Christmas*.)

Angel: "I came over for the first time and I had a fever – he was getting me tissues – and then he was explaining to me that the music was all Black Flag covers that he'd learned from memory. And I was like, *oh...kay* – the only reason I knew Henry Rollins was from being a VJ on MTV."

Brian: "After we toured the songs, we played Angel *Damaged* for the first time..."

Angel: "And I was like, 'YEEAHHH!'"

Rise Above (2007). "The idea was to do the 'New Attitude' process in reverse – not a studio album adapted for the live band, but a living collection of songs fitted to a recording. Rehearsed, intense 12 hour days, etc etc. Band then plays whole album every night on tour of USA, including stops in Shittown and St Craposphere."

When Dave Longstreth was 11 or 12, out in genteel, sceneless Connecticut, he started listening to his older brother's tapes. *Damaged*, one of the founding texts of American hardcore, became his favourite, despite its tenuous application to his life.

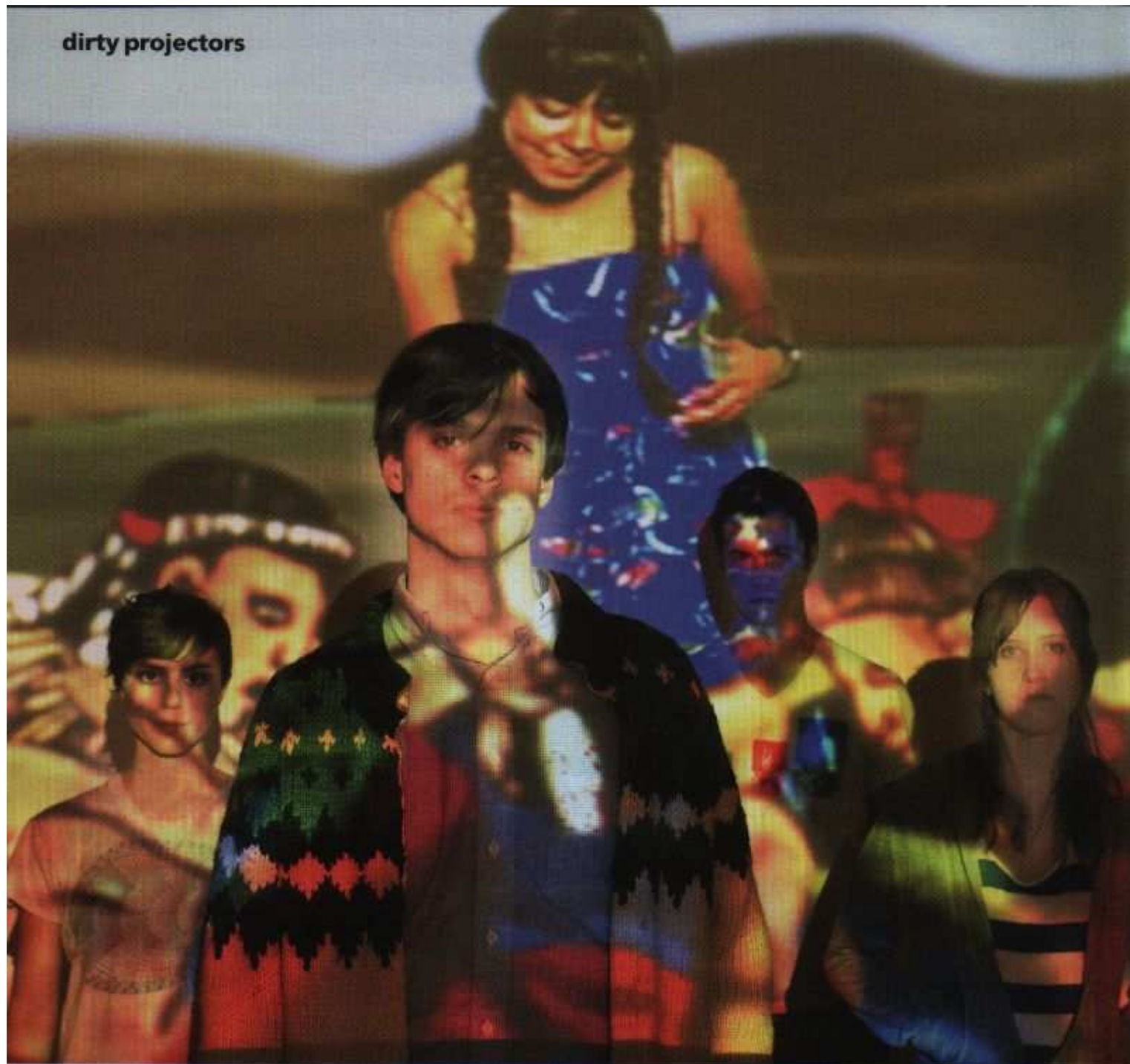
wall (can you imagine?) when said kids heard it.

It reinforces the original's guitar, bass, drums and voice with flutes, violins, violas and cellos, proceeds by apparently magical transitions and glorious transpositions – "We're fighting a war we can't win," sung contentedly, as from the perspective of eternity. Vocals assume an arrow formation, Dave throwing salmon-leaps and swallow-dives, a glorious hiccupping flux of emotion diluted only by the air he gulps in to push it out again – while the female voices behind combine like broad shafts of light, the chorus to his arias. The arrangements feel as densely structured but as ultimately exposed and vulnerable as a beetle's underbelly.

"In the way that you write any music, you have one element and then you think of another that goes with it. *Damaged* is a very...narrow band of data. And you can do a lot with that."

Incidentally: "I got a MySpace message from an employee at a music store in Austin. The clerk was planning on attending our show that night and so he'd thrown the record on and – not 15 seconds into it – Rollins walks in..." Through the wall. "Yeah – and he went straight to the Sun Ra section and apparently bought a bunch of those and some African music, which is really funny. But apparently he was looking up at the speakers and cracking up."

Last night, I say, I listened to *Damaged*, and then I listened to *Rise Above* (he punctuates my sentence with an "Awesome!") and it was interesting how incredibly the lyrics worked as a libretto.



'I'm into inspiration, I'm into new vibes'

"The words are *amazing* – so powerful, and so direct."

But your delivery couldn't be any more different. "Sort of different."

A lot different. When Rollins sings, all the emotion is encased in a shell – whether he's angry, sad – even in the joke songs. Whereas yours is completely open, and that transforms the way the words come across. Thinking about Dave's ("super-melismatic" *a la* Mariah/Whitney) vocal style – the one constant in all his recordings – the next question clangs from my lips like scrap metal: do you sing like that naturally...?

He smiles. "It has to do with singing the melodies that I write. I think of the contours of the melody before I think of the phrasing of the words. I think that's what makes me seem so strange to

people." So you really do think of the voice as an instrument. It's not commentary over the top... I run out of words. He nods.

Longstreth is coy about *why* *Damaged* was chosen for this project, but when I ask him if he considered any others he acknowledges – not. You won't be so very surprised to hear I have a theory.

Initially and instinctually, there's the sense of an adult looking back on the all-or-nothing idealism of youth. He murmurs, non-committal. More importantly, if the punk/hardcore underground was co-opted at length by big business, it's now looking like another shift may be in the offing, as technology finally, fatally outflanks the centralisation of media production and distribution – we seem to be moving ever further from a monoculture – and so MySpace supplants MTV, a (more-or-less) grassroots sprawl rather than top-down media.

Creativity is about connecting things which haven't been before. The internet is a connection-making machine, has swallowed all – and, to some degree, equalised them. This is the radical ground zero for the more astute artists of our generation – and it is fertile beyond numbers.

One of the things I love about *Rise Above* is that it almost seems to point toward this near future when ideas which couldn't work at the time, finally can and do.

"Yeah, I like that idea. That might have been the reason for choosing *Damaged* as opposed to some other album."

I want to end this with the last song on the record – which was the first song on the original, a total inversion which mirrors how the album title has shifted from negative to positive (and the tense from past to – potentially – future). Neatly enough, it's 'Rise Above' itself.

And on an album in which Dirty Projectors never stop making it new (again), having quested forward and sideways and inside out, they attain a summit and at long last allow themselves some nostalgia, one glance over their shoulders.

As Dave Longstreth, miles from the frontline, saw the whole of the storm on the horizon and appreciated its beauty, this is the spirit isolated from the struggle. It is a requiem but also a ritual.

The memory of a dream is still a dream – and all it needs is dreamers to make it real again.