

High Llamas Bio, 2003-04.

The pop scene of the late 20th century (and early 21st) is rife with songs and stories, fables and myths, maps and legends. It is too early to guess at what will survive and what will fall by the wayside - or is it? From the clutter of product that has littered the bins over the course of the last decade, the High Llamas stand out - as an influence, an inspiration and a sign of the times.

The High Llamas have released seven albums to date, spanning the world several times over in the process. However, their story begins in London, England, where so many of the legends of rock n roll - and verily, music and culture through the ages - emanated. Following the demise of Microdisney, Irish émigré Sean O'Hagan released a LP under his own name entitled *High Llamas*. An idea was born - an idea that involved making beautiful pop music.

It was a timely thought: the 80s, with its harsh technology-(mis)informed sounds, was ending. As the 90s began, it was anyone's ballgame. Starting in 1992 with an EP ("Apricots"), and then an LP (*Santa Barbara*), High Llamas erected their signature, postmodern, wall of sound - featuring songs with singing, chimes of melody, multi-part harmonies and other inspirations from the golden age. By the time of 1994's *Gideon Gaye*, all the pieces were in place. High Llamas astonished the listener with a combination of sounds and influences that evoked former works of genius and previous eras of popular song. At the same time, O'Hagan and his ever-expanding crew made this combination into a sound all their own.

*Gideon Gaye* was met with high praise from not just listeners, but critics as well. High Llamas' 1996 follow-up, *Hawaii*, received more of the same. O'Hagan's collaborations with Stereolab (which dated back to 1993), were equally well-received, leading the record-buying public to a perception of a new guard. During this time, High Llamas began making inroads in the American marketplace. With their American music and culture fascinations (and west coast-based album titles like *Santa Barbara* and *Hawaii*), High Llamas were a natural fit. Starting with *Hawaii*, an association with the V2 label began, initiating several tours over the next five years.

High Llamas continued to evolve over the course of their late-90s releases *Cold and Bouncy*, *Snowbug* and *Buzzle Bee*. Adding electronics into their bag of tricks, they proceeded to new sonic vistas, always holding forth the value of the song. While many comparisons can be drawn to any number of other performers in history, it is the Llamas fusion of multiple genres that makes them so unique, so compelling. No matter who they sound like, the High Llamas' sound is melodic, densely layered, eclectic, adroitly produced and entirely of their own making.

Moving from V2 to Drag City with *Buzzle Bee* in 2000, High Llamas then entered a period of gestation. Fewer tour dates were scheduled; instead, invitations to play with, produce, arrange, and remix other artists were accepted. In 2001, Sean O'Hagan collaborated with Jean Pierre Muller on a musical painting that has since been installed at galleries in London, Cork, Dublin and Brussels. A solo tour of America took place that fall, confronting fans with the improbable sound of High Llamas songs accompanied only by nylon-string guitar. Not so improbably, it was still a beautiful sound.

2003 has seen a flurry of activity, starting with a double-CD compilation of the V2 years entitled *Retrospective, Rarities and Instrumentals*. With the 90s effectively summed up, High Llamas have presented a new album for the first time in three years. *Beet, Maize and Corn* showcases a new phase High Llamas, with their trademark kitchen-sink

arrangements combed back to an austere, albeit somewhat deceptive, "starkness." As ever, classical inspirations are paramount and the song is all. With tour dates scheduled for 2004 and the rest of the future at hand, High Llamas remain a band to watch - or more importantly, to hear.