

## IDLEWILD

Maybe it's the lush climate, maybe it's the protective isolation, but something about the Scottish Highlands yields a hearty strain of rock band. Idlewild, which sprung from these volcanic hills, formed at an Edinburgh art school in 1995, thrashed around on pub stages for a year or two, then underwent a classic evolution: from distortion-wielding punk scrappers to commanding, elegant songwriters and absolutely enthralling performers -- with the edge retained, following the same path greats like the Replacements did over the course of a decade. But they did it in two albums.

After a debut single and EP that drew the immediate attention of influential Radio One DJ Steve Lamacq, Idlewild's first proper album, 1999's *Hope Is Important*, was a document of their raucous live shows, amassing as much pointed riffage as four Scottish art students could muster. "We sounded like an American indie-rock band," sums up singer Roddy Woomble, an admitted devotee of Minor Threat, Sonic Youth, Nirvana, and other U.S. greats. While *Hope's* positive reception was enough to rank Idlewild among the brightest of new, punk-inflected Scottish bands, the group exhausted this concept naturally and quickly. "We had the advantage of being able to develop the old fashioned way," says Woomble. "Playing concerts until you understand that you've played too many concerts like that and you want to change it into something else." Unbound by scene fascism or London hype, they decided they'd been "the best version of an American indie-rock band a Scottish band could be," per Woomble, and began to explore a new direction: songs.

"I'd always been very interested in the written word," says Woomble, whose school teacher mother is a poet. "But when I was into indie-rock and punk-rock, I never cared too much about lyrics. Then I realized that all the books I'd been reading and all the things I'd been thinking about could make their way into songs." He also tried his hand at another new challenge: singing notes. "I never thought of myself as a singer, really," says Woomble. "I just thought of myself as the guy in the band that didn't play any instruments."

This changed on with the release of *100 Broken Mirrors*, a cult hit in the U.S that made the four fetchingly collegiate Scotsmen the alt-rock find of 2001. Named the "Number One Record You Didn't Hear" by Spin magazine, *Windows* bristled with the kind of pointed riffs and post-punk intensity few associated with the band's region -- then a center of languid British balladry a la Travis. But it also revealed a sure knack for vocal harmonies and Woomble's distinctive lyricism: a keening voice that suggested a Gaelic Michael Stipe, with oblique verses that rose up into haunting, enigmatic refrains -- "All I need is a little dis -- courage," "Don't be real/Be postmodern. "

Drawing listeners in with insistent tugs against language and meaning, Woomble's canny references and elliptical style recalled Pavement phrasemaker Stephen Malkmus -- and earned the band the surprising (to them) epithet, "literary." "Suddenly, we had this fanbase that was fifty-percent people that wanted to push their friends and throw beer around and fifty percent people who were actually really interested in the words, " says Roddy.

Emboldened by this giddy, if two-fold reception, the group continued touring America and began work on their next album. Having recorded seven songs over Christmas of 2001, they returned home five months later feeling those songs already “sounded a little out of date,” says Woomble. “So we started again.” They spent a week in New York with the perfect soundingboard for a bunch of American rockophiles: Patti Smith guitarist and encyclopedic rock guru Lenny Kaye. “It was kind of amazing really,” says Woomble. “He just had such different instincts about our songs. He’d say, ‘Oh you should build this up more,’ or ‘Why hold back here?’ It really changed our attitude.”

Inspired, they marshalled forces, made some personnel changes -- hired touring guitarist Allan Stewart full-time (later replacing bassist Bob Fairfoull with Gavin Fox, from the Irish band Turn), and retreated to the solitude of a friend’s Highlands “croft,” an old sheep-herding farm. There, they spent three weeks tweaking and refining 20-odd songs, returning to Glasgow [right?] to record them with 100 Broken Windows producer Dave Ellinger.

The result is *The Remote Part*, a magnificent, 12-song LP that synthesizes elements of its two predecessors into an expansive, strikingly assured new vision of the band. It charges from the gate with “You Held the World in Your Arms,” the first single in the U.K., which features an indelible chorus that glistens with a New Orderish synth line. The ferocious “A Modern Way of Letting Go” comes next, maintaining the impression of five wired, gifted Husker Du acolytes before the third track comes along and utterly upends it.

“American English” is epic balladry with the sort of trembling beauty you might expect from U2 or Coldplay —until you listened through the first verse. A slow, chiming guitar arpeggio sets an altar for Woomble’s sweet, courtly dedication: “Songs when they’re truth/Are all dedicated to you...” But then he follows this by singing, no less sweetly, “And if you believe that/Then now I understand/Why words mean so much to you/They’ll never be about you.” Here, Idlewild manages the kind of musical bait-and-switch perfected by Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello, and few others: a song that explicitly pushes you away while its gorgeous melody pulls you in, that tempts your urge to inhabit the song with your life even as it says such ownership is an illusion.

On a brief recent tour with Coldplay, Idlewild were surprised by the response the song got. “At first there were a lot of people with their fingers in their ears,” he remembers. “But with ‘American English’ suddenly seemed to reunite all the couples, with their matching jumpers, singing along.” Woomble laughs when he realizes the inevitable comparisons to Coldplay and their countrymen, Travis. “I don’t criticize them or what they do,” he says. “But I think we’ve just listened to too many punk-rock records when we were younger so that [guitarist] Rod [Jones] can’t really play guitar like that without having some sort of inane smirk on his face.”

But like the album, this song takes on larger dimensions as it continues, rising to an elegy for someone who is “young without youth,” who “contracted American dreams” and is walking through life in a haze of fatal illusions. Among the non-musical inspirations for songs like this, Woomble cites Alan Warner’s novel *Movern Callar*, which he calls “almost a Scottish *Catcher in the Rye*,” with its rootless female protagonist. “I took a lot from just in the sense of the character, cause I know so many people like that,” says Woomble, who also cites the poetry of John Burnside and Edwin Morgan as companions to the making of this record — the latter more literally.

Near the end of the stately closer, “In Remote Part/Scottish Fiction,” the voice of the octogenarian

Scottish bard utters his brief poem “Scottish Fiction” atop the rising tide of guitars, piano, and drums. Woomble taped him in Morgan’s flat, after a years-long correspondence he began with Morgan since becoming a fan in school. “I taped him reading this poem about Scottish identity,” Woomble says. “But really about how one feels about the place they grew up. I thought it sounded so good that we had to use it for something.”

This is hardly Idlewild’s bid for poetic legitimacy “I definitely don’t consider myself a poet,” says Woomble. “I consider myself...” He trails off in thought. “I don’t know what I consider myself to be. That’s the point of being in a band.” Nor is *The Remote Part* a proud declaration of Scottish identity — although the interpretation is tempting. It features Scotland’s poet laureate, its title evokes homeland geography, and it’s the first Idlewild album whose singer has a recognizably Scottish accent. “As I got more natural, the accent came through more,” Woomble admits. “A lot of Scottish bands go through that, though. You see a band in Glasgow there’s an 80-percent chance the singer will have an American accent even though he ’s from, like, Greenock.”

What *The Remote Part* is, on the other hand, is a passionately- and expertly-made rock album, by a group of artisans coming into their own at a ripe, old average age of 25. The album swings from metallic ferocity (“(I Am) What I Am Not,” “Out of Routine,” “Stay The Same”) to elegant songcraft (“I Never Wanted,” “Live In a Hiding Place,” “Tell Me Ten Words”) so convincingly and with such assurance that it would verge on schizophrenia, if the voice and sensibility weren’t so distinct. “If people like Idlewild they’ll love *The Remote Part*,” says Woomble, 26. “And if they don’t know us, this is the best starting point.”

With its breadth of style and mood, *The Remote Part* — already gold in Great Britain — threatens to make Idlewild a new, national rallying point: a Next Big Thing from the British Isles. But Woomble, for one, doesn’t see it. “In Scotland, you know, Travis is seen as the kind of band that grannies sing along with,” he says. “I think we always seemed a bit more like cynical, indie-losers.” Still, he admits to a certain confidence in this chapter of Idlewild. Or at least a lack of total humiliation. “I suppose we’re more comfortable being ourselves,” he concedes. “I mean, the record’s not about Scottish pride, like, ‘Oh, it’s great to be from Scotland.’ You know, Edwin Morgan isn’t writing verses about thistle and shortbread.

“ It’s more like ‘We’re from Scotland and this is what we think about, you know, everything.’ ”