

Transference, the new album from Spoon

By Hiram Lee
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While only recently gaining widespread recognition for their work, the American rock band Spoon has been making music for nearly two decades now. The band formed in Austin, Texas in 1993, taking their name from a song by the German progressive rock group Can. While the band's line-up has changed over the years, the two constant members have been lead singer, songwriter and guitarist Britt Daniel and drummer Jim Eno. The current line-up also features the talented Rob Pope on bass guitar and Eric Harvey on keyboards.

Spoon released their first album, *Telephono*, in 1996 and since that time have produced a total of seven full-length albums and several EP releases. The band makes hard-hitting rock 'n' roll music that is firmly rooted in the traditions of the genre while at the same time always feeling fresh and alive. It is difficult to think of another contemporary rock group that has produced work of such quality so consistently over such a long period of time. Spoon's previous three albums in particular—*Kill the Moonlight* (2002), *Gimme Fiction* (2005) and *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga* (2007)—stand out as among the very finest of the last decade. Their 1998 album *A Series of Sneaks* is rightly considered one of the high points of "indie rock."

As a songwriter, Britt Daniel has frequently taken the lives of alienated youth as a source of inspiration for his work. Among the band's most admired songs—and among the best they have produced—is "The Way We Get By" from *Kill the Moonlight*. Here Daniel sings of a young couple just "getting by," "We get high in back seats of cars/we break into mobile homes. We go to sleep to shake appeal, never wake up on our own."

In the remarkable "I Summon You" from *Gimme Fiction*, Daniel sings in fragmented lyrics, "You got the weight of the world coming down like a mother's eye/And all that you can/All that you can give is a cold goodbye/The law enforcement's impressed you've survived to this age/Strapped-up soldiers/They'll lock

you in a cage without goodbye/For a nickel bribe/But aww no where are you tonight/And how'd we get here?"

In writing these kinds of songs, Daniel is critical of his subjects, but also sympathetic and compassionate. He is sincere and never cynical; he seems genuinely concerned about the fate of his fellow human beings and particularly the emotional depths to which so many descend under difficult circumstances. It's no wonder his work stands out from the majority of rock and pop music being made today.

Spoon's latest album, *Transference*, is a welcome addition to their catalogue of work. The new recording finds the group aiming for a stripped down, straight ahead rock 'n' roll sound for much of the work (at least five of the album's 11 songs were taken directly from original demo recordings with only minor changes and overdubs added later). The remainder of the work is devoted to more groove-oriented music in which the bass guitar and drums are given a prominent role.

Transference is filled with those lines that jump out and grab one's attention such as Daniel's "Some people are so easily shuffled and dealt" from the album's first single "Written in Reverse." There are those vivid images that immediately bring characters to life within the space of just a few lines such as in "Trouble Comes Running": "I was in a functional way/I had my Brown Sound jacket/Queen of call collect on my arm..."

"Trouble Comes Running" is an exciting rock 'n' roll song with Jim Eno pounding his snare drum on every beat and Daniel's aggressively strummed guitar given a thin, jangly distortion. The song reminds us just how much a rough-around-the-edges rock 'n' roll track can be worth.

This song is followed by "Goodnight Laura," a beautiful lullaby sung by Daniel with solo piano

accompaniment. The simple melody, unadorned as it may be, immediately draws the ear. The genuine emotion expressed for the Laura of the song's title is moving. "And you close your eyes and slow yourself," Daniel sings, "and let the worry leave you/And let go of it all just for this evening."

Of the album's more groove-centered tracks, "Who Makes Your Money," is perhaps the best. It sounds like nothing the band has recorded previously. The drums and bass are given center stage, locking into a near hip hop rhythm while an echo-laden melodica and keyboard provide subtle accompaniment. Daniel sings "Who makes your money?" again and again during the chorus, making it sound like a threat.

Much of "I Saw The Light" consists of Eno's uptempo blues shuffle on the drums and a single-string guitar riff descending the neck of Daniel's guitar before gradually growing into thick, down-strummed power chords that provide the perfect background for Daniel as he sings "I make my case to the world."

This song is a perfect example of Spoon's precise style of writing and producing music. Nothing feels wasted; everything is where it should be. The music is superbly crafted and thought out while never losing its spontaneity, its immediacy or its emotional impact on the listener. If things are stripped down to the essentials, they are never reduced to bare bones or self-consciously "lo-fi." The band never buries a groove under the clutter of excessive arrangements. The first minute of "Nobody Gets Me But You" finds Daniel singing over little more than a bass guitar and Eno's simple, steady drum beat; it makes an immediate impression.

Among Spoon's greatest assets has always been Britt Daniel's singing voice. There is always a tension present in his voice, a scratchy, half-screamed texture that one finds in singers like John Lennon. Other times, Daniel sings in the falsetto voice which made the band's 2005 funk song "I Turn my Camera On" such a success with audiences. The emphatic exclamations Daniel sometimes calls out between lyrics—an "uh huh" or "all right"—somehow manage to become essential parts of the composition. Even the pronunciation of certain words seems to be considered for their rhythmic qualities.

Spoon are truly at their best with their latest work. The band continues to turn out remarkable material,

never repeating themselves and yet always retaining their own personal sound. *Transference* should be considered among the group's best efforts. The band and the album are well worth listening to. Both deserve a larger audience.

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