



INVISIBLE CITIES

Zach Condon, the man behind *Beirut*, got famous by peddling souvenirs from places that don't exist. Now he's moving on to more familiar settings, without sacrificing an inch of the mystery.

STORY BY
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Zach Condon's cities do not exist in any tangible sense, and it's open to debate whether they ever did. But never mind; he knows the value of memory, the subtleties of fiction and the thinness of the line separating the two. He knows that snapshots fade with time, that places never stay faithful to our memories of them and that sooner or later objective truth becomes a fool's pursuit.

Beirut's 2006 debut record caught the world off guard, partly because of its timeworn sound and partly because a 19-year-old high school dropout from Albuquerque was making it. *Gulag Orkestar*'s musical merits are clear and occasionally overwhelming, but more importantly it's a fascinating album because it asks the question of place instead of answering it. The songs sound distinctly Balkan in their tone and instrumentation, and their names often reference bygone capitals of Eastern Europe. But such pinpoints do little to illuminate the characters and feelings that occupy them. In certain moments—often the best ones—the two seem at cross purposes.

As an imaginary geographer, Condon shares more with Iron & Wine's Sam Beam than he does with Sufjan Stevens or John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats, whose state-themed projects are more intimate and more methodical. Beirut's mountainside chants, like Iron & Wine's Faulknerian Americana, conjure times and places they don't belong to. They're faithful to a vague and ghostly idea, not historical detail, and we buy it because there's nobody around, or alive, to tell us otherwise.

Still, Condon's risk is greater than Beam's, because not even the physical setting for his stories is his. However vividly felt and perceptive his songs may be, however poignant their gypsy choruses and wozy brass lines, they still amount to insiders' stories told from the outside.

L'ÉTRANGER

Culturally and colonially speaking, France—where Beirut's second album, *The Flying Club Cup*, is set—has not dealt so kindly with outsiders. But while mining the country's heritage for a new set of influences,



Condon found an encouraging double-sidedness to its artistic borders. "I came to the conclusion that there's no such thing as French music," he says. "It's a bastard pop music that's just really beautiful and well executed, a hybrid of God knows what: American doo-wop, African music, crooners, romantics. There's no such thing as any one style, except for the dudes by the side of the river with the accordions."

Over a handful of visits around the country, Condon fell for the *chanson française* generation, a handful of songwriters including Jacques Brel, Charles Aznavour, and Serge Gainsbourg who restored a classical passion to their scenes of French life. "There's a kind of theatrical drama to it, and you can hear it in the music," he explains. "The music follows the words, the melodies build and break—and there's this over-the-top romance to this otherwise quite banal material. It rains in Paris and people are fucking crying about it."

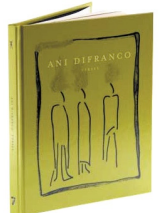
If Condon had a blueprint for his follow-up full-length to *Gulag Orkestar* it was to capture that drama and cultural crossbreeding. "There were certain sounds that I wanted to appear on it," he recalls. "I wanted organ grinder stuff going on, and accordion waltzes—certain clichés that at first I found silly but have grown to love."

True to conception, *The Flying Club Cup* mixes the funereal qualities of *Gulag Orkestar* with the decadence of France's cabaret days. It dresses up small-town melancholy as urban glamour and brings a swagger to Beirut's sepia-toned sound. This time Condon ditched the bedroom recordings for an eight-piece band, replete with strings and horns and (sure enough) accordions. But the overall quality feels much the same, because the trademark elements have hardly changed: a ghostly chorus in the ether of each song; delicate, old-fashioned percussion; that wistful ukulele (not guitar, never guitar), lurking somewhere in the mix. »

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If anything, it’s the ambition that has evolved—not in size, but in range. Though picking a country rather than a region closes off some avenues, it leaves more walks of life to narrate and more characters to occupy. Condon still sings with the world-weariness of a man three times his age, and at times he sounds constrained by how many different things he wants to reflect. His mournful croon is not strictly right for the angst of the proletarian or the giddiness of the tourist. But once again, that discord is secondary to the storytelling. Once again, the feat is how convincingly Condon makes the ancient themes of lightness and weight his own, all the while keeping precision at arm’s length.

LA GRANDE ILLUSION

Only two songs are named after cities this time—“Nantes” and “Cherbourg”—and, give or take a snippet from a Brigitte Bardot movie in the middle of the former, they have no more literal connection to their namesakes than “Bratislava” or “Prenzlauerberg” from *Gulag Orkestar* did. “[Jacques] Brel’s songs always seemed like they were about people in these fishing towns on the coast,” Condon says. “Setting a scene there puts this image in people’s heads, lets the imagination do whatever it wants to do. That’s where the city names come from. They make people think of so many things.”

For his part, Condon has never been to Nantes. He visited Cherbourg some years ago with his older brother, a week he remembers as “bizarre and cold.” The greatest chunks of his time in France have been spent in the northeast corner of Paris; besides the gaily shimmering “Forks and Knives (La Fête),” though, there’s practically nothing Parisian-sounding about *The Flying Club Cup*. In fact, there’s practically nothing that suggests any exact place or era. Condon’s songs are impressionistic microcosms, and more often contours drawn from imagined memories than snapshots of real ones. So someone had to ask, sooner or later—is that wrong?

Because alongside all the praise accompanying Beirut’s blogger-fueled rise to celebrity has been a persistent debate about authenticity. According to some, like writer Stu Sherman, who dismayingly pegged the popularity of *Gulag Orkestar* as “the ultimate expression of the post-modern condition,” Condon’s wanderlust is a dangerous thing.

In an article called “The Triumph of Musical Tourists” posted on *PopMatters* in October 2006, Sherman examined the lengthy Balkan music tradition and compared it to Condon’s unabashed outsider status. After a live show in Massachusetts and chat with Condon (and with the help of a few Marxist ideologues), he concluded that this one is “a generation that recognizes no greater achievement than the consumption of culture, and in Beirut it has an icon.”

The appropriation involved in Beirut’s otherworldliness is worth calling attention to—academically, at least. But to identify Condon as no more than a tourist with ill intentions is to sell short his gifts as a songwriter and storyteller. To reduce his work to its exotic features is to expect from his best songs—“Postcards from Italy,” for example, or “Scenic World”—a degree of complexity that they can’t, and shouldn’t, offer.

More importantly, to rail about fetishism and foreignness is to miss the point of the music. The problem with Sherman’s line of criticism is that it ignores centuries of precedent: Borrowing, to put it politely, has been standard practice since long before globalization and digital culture changed our practices of consumption. Inspiration and theft are two sides of the same coin. And for the record, few people know that better than the French.

NON, JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

It has crossed Condon’s mind to reconcile his work with the debate surrounding it, but mostly he prefers to play louder and move on. “In a way I’m playing devil’s advocate and making the whole thing more pompous and ridiculous,” he says. “I take the music seriously, and then to be



involved in this debate with people the whole time turns me into this teenager.”

Earlier this year, he released the short, pseudo-Balkan *Lon Gisland EP* to that effect. The title mocks the concept of exoticism, but the songs go right on embracing it. (The EP’s first words speak volumes about Condon’s sense of fiction, if not of himself: “If I was young, I’d flee this town.”) “That was the humor of that EP, the joke about setting the scene for this nostalgia fantasy there,” he chuckles. “It was like all these people saying ‘Balkan music!’ and me going, ‘No! Hair curlers!’”

To that end, Condon knows that identifying French music as a bastard pop doesn’t get him off the hook. But if *The Flying Club Cup* finds him pillaging what was hardly pure to begin with, it’s not a gesture of conciliation. He’s not retreating westward, not settling for a place he knows more than less. France may be a comparatively familiar setting, for both Condon and his listeners, but the payoff is the same as it used to be. His talent lies in the timeless and the placeless, in the absence of familiarity.

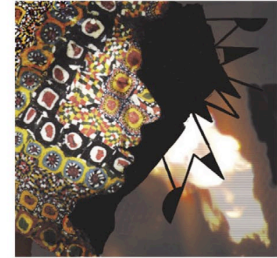
This much is clear when he talks about how inspiring it is to play with real Balkan musicians and listen to Cambodian renditions of American pop songs, or about his plans to make a Portuguese folk album or return to New Mexico to record with a

mariachi band. There is still the question of how far he really needs to travel to tap into his talent for invention, but it’s not for us to ask. It’s for Condon to keep answering until he is no longer young, and no longer wants to flee. “People are approaching this like I’m trying to be a musicologist, and when it comes down to it I’m quite the opposite,” he says. “It’s not like I’m sitting in my room with a map, wondering where to attack next. I’m looking for a catchy melody. That’s as far as the story goes.”

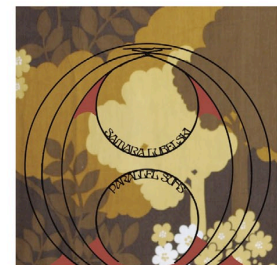
It’s fair game to question the cultural accuracy of *The Flying Club Cup*, but only as far as we can interrogate *Paris, Je T’aime* or *Ratatouille*, and only as far as the questions don’t distract us from what its imaginary places have to offer. France recorded by Condon is a myth, but France sketched by a Frenchman would be too; so would America rendered by an American. For any place according to any storyteller worth listening to, it has to be that way.

Better to embrace that a Frenchman couldn’t make music quite like this, and that neither could anyone else. It’s hard to condemn tourism in a place that doesn’t exist, because nobody is shortchanged. As for us, what we’re after is presumably art that comes from the heart, and anyone who believes that Condon’s prodigious imagination rests solely in the brain hasn’t been really listening. ☉

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