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Vampire Weekend

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I saw Vampire Weekend supporting The Shins at Hammersmith Apollo last November and was impressed by their mix of hooky poppiness and complex African rhythms. I marked them down mentally as a band to keep an eye on, and with the release of their excellent eponymous debut album I'm pleased I did.



Hailing from New York, Ezra Koenig (vocals/guitar), Rostam Batmanglij (keyboards), Chris Baio (bass) and Christopher Tomson (drums) met at New York's Columbia University and much is made in press releases of their degree subjects and general braininess. Well, why not? Koenig's academic background in English is apparent in his dense, poetic lyrics, which give just the right amount of suggestion to be compelling without stepping over the line in to arbitrary; handily, there are a couple of Music graduates in the shape of Batmanglij and Tomson (who also did Economics) and Baio's Russian Regional Studies suggest an interest in diverse cultures and influences, something that permeates this record from start to finish. Coining their own genre titles including Upper West Side Soweto and Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa (also the name of a song on this album), the band have eschewed the straightforward indie rock approach to create something vibrant and genuinely different.

'Oxford Comma' - an optional comma before the word 'and' at the end of a list, in case you were wondering - has an early Beatles-style rhythm accompanying the deliciously wry lyrics: "Who gives a fuck about an Oxford comma? / I've seen those English dramas too / They're cruel". There's more than a little of the young Sting about Koenig's vocal chords, most noticeable on the jangly 'A-Punk'; thick keyboard flute parts interweave over a busy bassline while the vocals slice right through. 'Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa' is a wondrous melting pot of styles, combining complicated polyrhythmic African percussion, a jaunty walking bassline, cute indie guitar riffs and medieval prog keyboard parts with a calm but assured vocal that namechecks Peter Gabriel. Somehow it makes perfect sense and swings along nicely, mellow and chilled but eminently danceable.

'Campus' is a morning-after-the-night-before song, the aftermath of sleeping with a fellow student. It's a little bit Strokesy and a little bit Policey; "How am I supposed to pretend / I never want to see you again?" goes the wistful chorus before falling in to a perfectly balanced backdrop of do-re-mi bass and muted organ sounds for the lovelorn verses. 'Bryn' is lilting and evocative, all "ion displacement" that won't "work in the basement" and "fireflies that sleep in my heart", leading in to the marvellously poppy 'One (Blake's Got A New Face)' with nu rave tinged keyboard bits and awesome comedic backing vocals.

There isn't a song on this album that isn't a joy to listen to. Vampire Weekend bring in a whole pile of instruments, influences and ideas and somehow manage to avoid sounding like an overambitious gloopy mess of a band. Their playful exuberance and sheer joy at letting loose all the usual inhibitions of song arrangement makes for a fresh, enjoyable and inspiring collection of songs that you'll keep coming back to.



Track listing

1. Mansard Roof
2. Oxford Comma
3. A-Punk
4. Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa
5. M79
6. Campus
7. Bryn
8. One (Blake's Got A New Face)

9. I Stand Corrected
10. Walcott
11. Kids Don't Stand A Chance

Try Vampire Weekend if you like: The Shins, The Strokes, The Police

Laura Kidd