

MARSEILLE FIGS: THE DIRTY CANON

PRESS/REVIEWS as of FEB 2008

FINANCIAL TIMES

February 18 2008

Marseille Figs, The George Tavern, London (TDC Launch Party, 15.02.08)

The Marseille Figs have effected a brilliant collision of folk styles. The suited, trilby-ed trio occupy the centre of a Venn diagram connecting country, blues, punk, oompah and jumping jive music. It is an entertaining and novel acoustic sound driven by assertive vocals embedded in well-crafted songs.

It is not only their music that is boundary crossing. The band itself has roots in three European countries. Frontman and former artist J. Maizlish resides in Berlin (but still keeps a foot in his earlier profession, most recently working with artist Marcia Farquhar), while accordionist Dorian McFarland and saxophonist Tom Chant have established presences in London and Barcelona. Marseille holds its place in the band's history as the city where Maizlish met McFarland at an art show. The importance of figs is not apparent.

For this, the launch of their new record *The Dirty Canon*, the Figs doubled their number. Founder-Pogue and visual artist Jem Finer, who had a hand in producing the record, plucked a banjo, while the rhythm section comprised another Pogue, drummer Andrew Ranken, and experimental double bassist John Edwards, whose backing was neither too rigid nor too elastic, but elegantly pinned the songs down.

Whistling through two sharp sets but struggling against a poor sound mix, the band peppered their album material with some covers. They gave Chuck Berry's "Memphis" more desperation than Elvis did and invested Disney's schmaltzy "When You Wish Upon A Star" with a spooky chill. But it was in their own material that the band really shone. "Skin & Bones", with Tom Waits-like lyrics ("Who's that little girl with a glassy eye") and a darkside "Sunny Afternoon" Kinks-like chord structure, was a sound jamboree: Finer drew a violin bow across his banjo, which fused with the solid, throbbing bass and rattling tambourine to great effect. Throughout the set the ensemble switched between instruments – saxes, flugelhorns, melodicas, trombones, accordions, guitars and ukuleles were all given a good airing.

The wonderful fading splendour of the George Tavern – a hostelry whose future is in the hands of the Tower Hamlets planning department – contributed to the demi-monde feel of a show that had the raw soul of rock'n'roll.

4/5

Mark Espiner

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ROCK 'N' REEL

January/February 2008

The fact that a member of Marseille Figs attended St Martin's School of Art makes for a worryingly high reading on the barometer of archness. But it would be foolish to allow that to put you off this undeniably arty, but wonderfully rewarding album. Comprising California-born singer-songwriter J Maizlish, accordionist Dorian McFarland and Tom Chant on reeds, the Figs purvey a splendidly rustic stew of back porch blues, down-home country, uptown vaudeville and a smattering of bebop.

The sound is often a bit slapdash – Maizlish's untutored voice occasionally resembles that of an adolescent Tom Waits – but the fact that that legendary jazz-improv bassist John Edwards is on hand, while Chant's CV includes work with AMM percussionist Eddie Prévost, speaks volumes.

Finally, the album has been knitted together under the guidance of two men who know a thing or two about roots recording, Jem Finer and DM Bob. The end result is a wonderfully eclectic, goodtime album, wrapped in a suitably artistic sleeve. Whether they can re-create this in a live setting is another matter altogether.

4/5

Gerry Ranson

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EMUSIC

Jan 2008

The best bluegrass, avant-garde jazz and Klezmer-influenced record of 2007.

London-based trio Marseille Figs' first full-length album includes an engaging country-skiffle song in which frontman J. Maizlish muses upon the efficacy of chat-up lines uttered by Don Juan, Casanova and Romeo. The California-born Maizlish is dismissive of their bon mots, but he can't help but envy the trio's "bed them, then breakfast with them skills": "Any such crap/ man they had it on tap/ and it was 'Honey How You Like Your Eggs?'" he sings.

Such playfulness is a staple of the Figs' approach, but elsewhere on their bluegrass, avant-garde jazz and Klezmer-influenced record the humour is darker. "Caesar's Revenge," kicking-off with filthy, rasping sax, soon evolves into an episodic tale of a wilful, ill-starred misfit, its titular hero showing no remorse when he eventually bites back. Bible black, Southern Gothic in flavour and communicated with maximum drama and relish, it's the kind of song that would sit nicely on Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds 1992 album *Henry's Dream*.

Maizlish handles vocals, guitar and ukulele on *The Dirty Canon*, and has able foils in multi-instrumentalists Dorian McFarland (accordion, mouth-harp etc.) and Tom Chant (saxophones, clarinet and keyboards). This core trio is joined by a rhythm section comprising drummer Jack Brennan and double-bassist John Edwards, and the album's forthright, 'live in the studio' feel was mostly nailed in Hamburg, Germany with Jem Finer of the Pogues and "Louisiana swamp-pop legend" DM Bob sharing production duties.

Chant's outlandish freak out sax solos on songs such as "Skin & Bones" are most welcome, while Maizlish's voice, capable of everything from a hillbilly yodel to a snazzy jazz-blues wail, knows no half-measures. The group's name, in case you were wondering, probably derives from the fact that Maizlish and McFarland are also visual artists who once exhibited at the same show in Marseille. Their restless creativity is well to the fore on *The Dirty Canon*, an eclectic and winningly irreverent album that only a fool would attempt to categorize.

James McNair

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17DOTS.COM

11 Jan 2008

Old Arrivals: Marseille Figs

Here's something that came in a while ago, but is worth lending your ears to. Marseille Figs' first album *The Dirty Canon* came out last November and has been gathering a slow swell of underground support. We noticed a spike in sales on

eMusic yesterday, when the people at the [Boing Boing](#) blog wrote [this review](#). They describe them as "a small big band... Violent Femmes meets Tom Waits meets Squirrel Nut Zippers." As a description, that's pretty much on the money, excepting that while Tom Waits' flyblown charm is a distinctly American proposition, the Figs remind me of the type of red-faced accordion player you'd find in the last old-fashioned bar by the rapidly gentrifying docks in port towns like Liverpool, Antwerp or Brindisi. The low-life elements aside, it's a happy sounding collection of songs, full of battered hope, swinging dances and joyful silliness.

Anna Fielding

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BOINGBOING.NET

9 Jan 2008

Marseille Figs: uptempo pop from a "small big band" – Violent Femmes meets Tom Waits meets Squirrel Nut Zippers

Yesterday, I picked up *The Dirty Canon*, Marseille Figs' first album on the advice of a friend. I've barely listened to anything since. My pal called them a "three piece big band" who trade instruments around a lot and change up on every track. That's a great explanation – they sound like a cross between Violent Femmes and Tom Waits, with some Squirrel Nut Zippers and even a little Louis Jordan tossed in for good measure, a rich stew of every music style overlaid with funny and soulful lyrics. Mostly uptempo, it put me in an instant good mood. What's more, it's just plain *lovely* – there's a current of something delicate and wistful swirling through all twelve tracks. Check out the free downloads on the site and see what you think.

Cory Doctorow

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KRUGER MAGAZINE

Dec 2007

To describe the first album by Marseille Figs as idiosyncratic is something of an understatement. Completely fucking demented might be a better way of putting it. But that is no bad thing, for *The Dirty Canon's* joyous collage of ukelele swing, free jazz sax, folk-punk and thumping double bass is an iron-rich antidote to much of the anaemic indie around right now. And while most of the songs are proper bouncy shindig-soundtrackers there are some surprisingly delicate moments, most notably the lovely, accordion swept "Good Year". A must for anyone who isn't scared of rambunctious attitudes and a healthy disregard for musical boundaries.

EH

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SUBBA-CULTCHA.COM

Dec 2007

2007 Year End Best Of Polls / Writers' Top 10s

1. Marseille Figs - *The Dirty Canon* (Cargo): "Finally, something that sounds truly fresh and original with enough of its own reference points to become a champion. Thank 2007 for Marseille Figs."

Alan Baillie (Edinburgh)

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LONDON TOURDATES

14 Dec 2007

Marseille Figs are a honky-tonk maelstrom. A punk hoe-down. A four-minute-warning siren blowing through a kazoo. On top of breakneck upright bass, banjo and hillbilly guitar, vocalist – a carefully selected noun, there – J. Maizlish Mole yelps like a hybrid of Johnny Cash and Isaac Brock, about all manner of philosophical smuttery (which if it isn't a word, ought to be). 'Honey How You Like Your Eggs' is a cynical deconstruction of the Casanova figure, who smooth-talks "Any such crap, man they got it on tap," and also contains such gems as the faux female/male call and response of "I like the way you don't fold your laundry / I like the way you don't fold your legs / Put down your book, come and get a closer look". *The Dirty Canon* is a gin soaked, dusty, saloon bar brawl of a record... And if that doesn't sell it to you, nothing will.

Mike Bloss

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THELINEOFBESTFIT.COM

26 Nov 2007

I have to admit to being a little surprised that one of my favourite albums of the year has come from a three-piece wielding an accordion, ukulele and flugelhorn, not to mention a chicken organ and a fake trumpet. But while the **Marseille Figs'** list of instruments reads like a mail order catalogue for a joke-come-junk shop (I didn't mention the buzz organ, juju guitar and monkey mouth), there's good old-fashioned percussion and guitars too, and a truly heavenly old school ragtime bar busking sound that manages to beautifully emulate Violent Femmes and The Bad Seeds in just the first two tracks. And as it goes on, you realise *The Dirty Canon* really does have everything; upbeat swamp pop, dour and earthy storytelling, heart-stopping ballads and a wicked sense of humour, all played with skill and dexterity across a dizzying array of styles and tempos.

If you're a fan of the likes of Violent Femmes and Shoulders you simply have to check out Marseille Figs. They have a slightly misleading tag as avant-garde amateurs, due mainly to following the songwriting ethics of punk and folk traditions, but the result is an infectious mix of American and European folk played with a freedom falling somewhere between jazz showing off and punk abandon. Not bad for a trio who rarely reside in the same country at once and tend to gig when they happen to be in the same place at the same time.

Special mention too, for the lyrics. Like The Broken Family Band, they effortlessly occupy both ends of the spectrum, making you laugh one minute and dragging you down a dark alley for a good kicking the next. 'Caesar's Revenge' is a biopic of an angry motherfucker built around the line, "But I didn't give a fuck about it anyway". When frontman J. Maizlish delivers the line, "Absolutely goddamned right my friend" you picture Nick Cave every time. But then, in the next track, it's all jolly, have-to-get-up-for-a-boogie nonsense with 'Honey How You Like Your Eggs'. My personal favourite, though, is 'Dirty Little Monkey'; the first time I heard the line, "He's a dirty little monkey and his mammy don't wear no drawers" I was on a packed tube. I may have looked like a total twat giggling away to myself like a schoolgirl, but hey, them's the breaks. And frankly, anything that gets you through the daily commute with a smile is a bonus.

I could witter on about this for ages, but I won't bore you any longer. For example, did I mention the foot-tappin' mouth organs on 'Boxcar Charlie'? The clever, lilting close to 'Don't Fall Asleep at the Wheel'? The... oh, sorry. Just go listen to it.

90%

Chris Marling

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NEW-NOISE.NET

16 Nov 2007

For all those seeking a record that begins with double bass, hand claps and a voice at the extreme limit of stretching then this might be for you, and all that happens within track one. Marseille Figs sounds very double entendre like anyway, but when you add the album title of *The Dirty Canon* you rather feel that they are smirking a lot. The second track sounds like a drunk snake charmer and in equal measure throughout the album, there are elements of The Pogues meets Nick Cave but with extra eccentricity and added parts of schizophrenia. All in all it's as mad as a hatter, but just as endearing at the same time.

Andrew Dolton

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MONGREL MAGAZINE

16 Nov 2007

Cardinal Pole was the Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII. In 1525, he took the time to plant a Marseille fig tree in the grounds of Lambeth Palace. Given that this is pretty much the only other time the words Marseille and Fig crop up together, I guess this arty honky-tonk band were inspired by a guy who sounds like the Vatican's only porn star. Kinda weird but you know, it works.

83%

McGraw

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SUBBA-CULTCHA.COM

Nov 2007

Hillbilly Rock and Roll

Double bass. Banjo. Buzz Organ. Whistles. Piano. Accordion. Tenor Sax (to name a few) and of course, your standard tools of the trade, guitars and drums. Add to this some fractured, wavering vocal delivery, some brilliant left of centre song structuring and the evidence manifests the genius of the creators! The splicing of genres and a feel good ambience all round. Marseille Figs will have you dancing in the lounge of cutting edge sui generis quicker than a heartbeat!

This record is drenched in the rich tapestries of musicianship. It's the seemingly effortless grasp of their craft, individually and collectively, that makes this such a fucking great album! Opening with 'Low Low Thing', it's pure hillbilly rock and roll, a genre that probably hadn't even known it existed, until now! 'Caesars Revenge' contains within a sure contender for lyric of the year with 'my heart didn't bleed and my nose didn't break', and the song itself is crisp and cocky enough to get away with absolutely anything it may wish to. And then to 'Honey How You Like Your Eggs', a song you can imagine the forest dwelling redneck deviants from Deliverance requesting to be played down their local disco as they dance away that sexual tension, baby!

'Losers Delight' slows things down to the pace of quirky folk music with accordions and 'Boxcar Charlie' with whistling and guitars pushes things back up slightly. And still there are great things on the horizon of this record with 'Cradle Song', 'Eh Joe' and 'Skin and Bones' and still another glorious 20 odd minutes to go filled handsomely with 'Where The Night Begins', the fried acid jazz feel of 'Dirty Little Monkey'. Penultimate track, the chilled out tie loosening caress of

'Good Year' and ending with the very stunning 'Don't Fall Asleep At The Wheel'. Marseille Figs have done good. Real good! Listening to this will leave you in the euphoria usually experienced seconds before orgasm! Yep, it's that good! Don't waste it post-coital!

4/5

Alan Bailli

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ROOMTHIRTEEN.COM

6 Nov 2007

Something New, For a Change

Some bands you can put into a box and pretty much close the lid. Their take of whatever genre they have decided to play is so mundane and predictable that it holds your interest as long as a paper cup hold boiling water. Or it can simply be the type of music that is the problem. You hold your head and you think, there must be more than this! You hope high hopes of someone, somewhere thinking outside of the box and releasing something that is both different and well realised. For this reason alone we should be thankful for The Marseille Figs, because their debut, *The Dirty Canon* pretty much answers that prayer.

The Dirty Canon is not going to appeal to everyone. For fans of hard edged rock or too-cool-for-school indie then this is not really going to interest. Likewise, teenagers following their friends into the nether regions of emo schlock-rock are not going to find much to savor here. But that's almost what makes the album such a treat, because its not designed for those people. "The Dirty Cannon" does not follow trends, fashions or sensibilities of the mainstream. It simply takes the elements from what each of the three members' own tastes and abilities are and mix them together in a mixing pot of European retro-pop, deep south country and even some of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds miserablism.

Which is odd because the album itself is remarkably upbeat. It would take a very cynical ear to not allow a smile to creep in when hearing 'Honey How Do You Like Your Eggs', a chuckle with 'Caesar's Revenge' and a laugh with 'Boxcar Charlie'. Elsewhere, the listener can find the thoughtful 'Good Year' and 'Where The Night Begins'. It's a contrast for sure, and one that puts the listener in mind of what a zany, offbeat group can actually achieve when they are given free reign.

The Dirty Canon is most probably destined to be huge, mainly because they are surely going to be picked up by a mobile phone or car company for use in their overplayed adverts. After time we may forget that this is in fact a great band with a quality album, but as for now its here and it deserves to be heard by as many people as possible. It's very hard to be critical of an album with this innovation and originality, so suffice to say that it comes with a strong recommendation for music lovers anywhere.

Chris Daykin