

# Belle & Sebastian gain weight

## CD Review

BY KENAN DAVIS

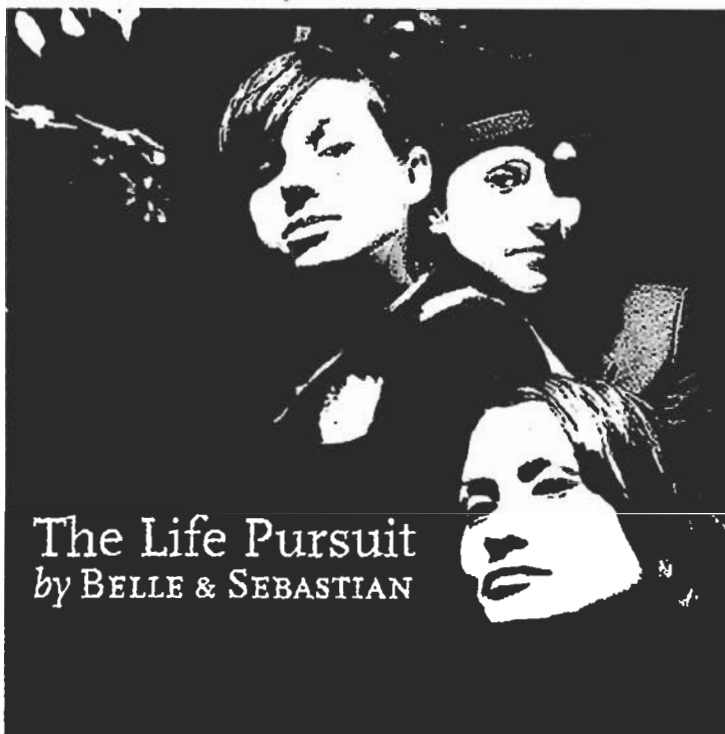
Valdosta-Lowndes County Preview

“They are mousy and harmless. It’s just music to go to sleep to,” said my girlfriend when I played Belle and Sebastian’s newest release, “The Life Pursuit.”

I don’t share my girlfriend’s distaste for Belle and Sebastian, but I do empathize with her opinions to some degree because of my own ambivalent feelings towards these Scottish “chamber-pop” heroes. I have only been able to listen to previous B&S releases in small doses and in certain situations such as background music during a dinner party or on car rides alone where I can indulge in feeling narcissistic and self-absorbed. They’ve been a guilty pleasure like birthday cake that I’m careful not to eat in large quantities because it can make me nauseous.

On their seventh studio album, B&S continue to create lush orchestrated pop songs layered with washes of keyboards, strings, and horns along with upbeat-harmonized vocals. But they have added a muscle and power to their sound unheard on earlier work. They even seem to have progressed in their musicianship and ability to imitate the pop music styles of the ‘60s and ‘70s from folk to funk.

On their 1996 album, “If You’re Feeling Sinister,” Stuart Murdoch sang “nobody writes them like they used to so it may as well be me” and has most fully realized this sentiment on “The Life Pursuit.” The album evokes an anachronistic displacement with most of the musical movements of today and calls back to a time that most fans of B&S have no memory of outside growing up listening to their parents’ record collections. “The Blues are Still Blue” is note-for-note T. Rex glam rock, and “Song for Sunshine” has Stevie Wonder funk written all over it. Most of the other songs feel musically akin to ‘70s musi-



cals like “Hair” while there are a few glimpses of more contemporary influences like “Out of Time”-era REM on “To Be Myself Completely” and alternative country icons Wilco on the solemn “Mornington Crescent.” But the overriding mood is a conscious denial of concurrent movements like grunge, electronica, punk, and hip-hop to hearken back to their idols of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

The most rewarding and complex part of B&S is their juxtaposition of discordant music and lyrics. The lyrical content is still in the Morrissey mold of per-

sonal heartbreaks and adolescent identity crises while being paired with extremely upbeat, melodic music. B&S wears the mask of relentless happiness in the face of tragedy like a deranged clown. This parody exposes the injustices of life with a glaring eye. Underneath the polished sheen of layered upbeat pop tunes is an honest and amusing portrayal of the sadness and awkwardness of life. On “Dress Up In You,” the vocals harmonize the morbid compliment “If I could have a second skin/I’d probably dress up in you” blanketed in soothing horns and a buoy-

ant melody. These moments of satirical humor show B&S at their best.

“The Life Pursuit” shows a more competent and powerful B&S that challenges the listener to take hearty bites into the complexity underlying the catchy pop hooks re-appropriated from pop music’s past.

Kenan Davis is a contributing writer to Valdosta-Lowndes County Preview.


  
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