

Rollerball

Real Hair

"Some people act like stars. Some people see stars. But Rollerball I think might actually be stars — the galactic kind, giant nuclear fusion engines firing atoms & light across the vacuum of the universe. Right now, of course, the five members of Rollerball are trapped in human form, mere dying bones, blood, & brain cells. Yet there are moments during every Rollerball album when it seems like they cease to exist. They have transcended gravity, time, space. They have become energy."

- John Graham, Willamette Week

Rollerball is jazz or post-rock or no-wave or lounge music. In other words, it's the kind of band Han Solo would take Princess Leia to see to make her think he's hip & smart. Rollerball fully explores the world of texture and tone, ever teetering on the brink of chaos and dissonance without ever losing complete control. These are smoky, dark, modern cabaret songs built with accordion & dueling male-female vocal harmonies; gnarled jazz-damaged improvisations broken beneath reeds, brass, & percussion. These are future bass & piano standards.



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Real Hair, Rollerball's ninth full-length release, follows a more direct path than any of the band's previous albums. By zeroing in on actual songs (rather than a mixture of extended sound collage & improvisation) Rollerball captures the essence of its live sound more here than on any previous release. That's not to say that the group didn't utilize the studio for some sonic magic & deeper audio experimentation. In fact, this album marks the departure from their usual preference for home recording. Instead, Rollerball chose to record at Aleph Studios in Seattle, Washington with Randall Dunn (who has worked with all sorts of boundary blurring artists like Eyvind Kang, Critters Buggin', Wayne Horvitz, & Bill Horist). The result of this collaboration is a high definition recording, more focused on emphasizing pieces that are finite in process, but infinite in all the inner intricacies of nuance & possibility.



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“This album is staggering in its creativity, even though it's probably the most pop-focused of Rollerball's releases. They bring the funk influence, which has always been lurking, closer to the fore quite tastefully, with propulsive drums and full-bodied bass inspiring movement, but the highlight of their music is definitely the super-catchy lyrics and melodies. Stabbing, anthemic horn leads and smoky piano lines accompany their vaguely dadaist cabaret vocals, singing seemingly lighthearted verses about clarinet samples and our forefathers wearing drag, but the sense of tension that their dramatic presentation inspires is remarkable. Rollerball's little details of organic experimentation and everything-including-the-kitchen-sink noisemaking are still present in some form, but they're more tightly woven into the songs themselves, such that the album is full of interesting sounds throughout, but free from gratuitously tacked on elements. Still, this is a far cry from the extended free-noise of their earlier works. Tracks like "66 Deadhead Spies" and "Starling" play up the loungey aspects—shared male/female vocals and slick piano instrumentation; while a steady bassline anchors "Mike's Hind," the sole instrumental piece, as various sound effects and improvised phrases float through the mix. "Spine Delay" seems to be a shout out to all dudes in the audience with its deranged, at times hyper-falsetto, singing, until the horror-movie organ emerges and the band settles on a mellow groove. The album ends with a suitably incomprehensible spoken word piece about nature. Rollerball are an entertaining and interesting band, and it's great to hear further development of their refreshingly unique pop music."

- Steve Smith, Brainwashed.com

"Just when I think I have those merry pranksters over at Silber figured out, they somehow manage to spring a new one on me. At first, I thought they were a drone-oriented label (thanks to Aarktica's stellar *No Solace In Sleep*). But they've veered off into minimalist soundscapes (*If Thousands*) dark-ambient pieces (*Kobi*), more drone (*Small Life Form*), folk (*Rivulets*), industrial (*Clang Quartet*) and even a wee touch o' goth (*Lycia*). And then along comes Rollerball's *Real Hair*, which carves out its own unique niche in Silber's catalog. Just as with Silber, there's a sense of unpredictability about *Real Hair*. When you think you have the album figured out, the band seems content on frustrating your expectations. And that starts with the cover art, which, with its typefaces and pink hair, made me wonder just what the heck I was getting into. The album's first 3 tracks are darkly orchestrated pieces that traipse about just beyond the periphery of !!! and Out Hud's albums like some tattered gypsy caravan or danse macabre. While nowhere near as spastic and hip-shaking as !!!, there's an undeniable sense

of rhythm and groove that could get toes tapping and heads nodding (just listen to "Girls Hugging Trees" mariachi horns and grunting bassline)... or send shivers down your spine, Pleasure Forever-style. These songs possess a murky, almost cabaret-esque atmosphere, courtesy of the serpentine pianos and accordions and strange lyrics ("I forgot the taste of cold, sanitized steel") that haunt the songs' corridors.

However, "Mike's Mind" sounds just like the title implies, a wandering journey through a clouded mindscape littered with smatterings of trumpet, snippets of piano, and scattered drums; altogether, it sounds vaguely like Supersilent's work on the stunning 6. On the other hand, "Hecho En" slowly unfurls itself in the finest Do Make Say Think tradition. Female vocals float lazily amidst undulating accordions, billowing horns, and sparse percussion... before suddenly morphing into something the Volga boatmen might hum as they march alongside the River Styx. And even that disappears within a cascade of sad, wavering notes that, despite sounding somewhat out of place, nevertheless add a haunting touch.

"Spine Delay" dishes out the album's most bizarre moment, a quasi-hip-hop collage that sounds like Soul-Junk splicing together their own version of Beck's "Midnite Vultures". However, that lasts all of 2 minutes before giving way to murky organs, shuffling drums, banshee-like feedback, and more cryptic lyrics ("Spine delay/I sway/And I shimmer down to my knees").

Even after all that's transpired on the album so far, "Bara" still might be the album's most schizophrenic song, alternating between drunken uproars in which pianos, horns, and drums sound fully intent on crushing every bit of china within reach, and moments that sound almost Out Hud-esque with their pulsing electronic synths and rhythms. The electronic, uptempo moments are more interesting, and as such, I find it hard to get into the song as a whole simply because I never know how long it'll be before the song grows surly again.

"Eight Inch Nun" ends the album on a rather restrained and calm note... or so it seems at first. Over another mercurial soundscape of scattered drums, wordless vocals, and droning horns, a low voice recites the album's strangest, most cryptic lyrics - picture a cross between medieval alchemical imagery, socio-political commentary, and stream-of-consciousness psychedelia (a sample: "Elaborately framed portraits of multi-cultural lovers, tongues entwined, genitalia serpentine, and sprouting the luckiest four leaf clover in the world/It is beautiful all engulfing fire"). As with much of Real Hair, it doesn't make much rhyme or reason, and yet can be captivating and intriguing.

Still, as much as I like to be kept on my toes by an album, I have to say that I much prefer the moments on the disc when Rollerball exhibits more focus. While I enjoy the more bizarre and abstract sounds that are sprinkled liberally throughout

the disc, Rollerball is most successful when they can take those abstract sounds and work them into a more defined, song-oriented context. When they do so, the result (such as "66 Deadhead Spies" or "Starling") is all that much stronger and more captivating because of it.

-- Jason Morehead, Opuzine

"Girls Hugging Trees" starts with a grand-but-forboding horn-section, then the tight rhythm section kicks into a groove and this vocal line: "The sun is blocking out the church sign today". I don't mean to be melodramatic, but I want to say that this heralds another

album's worth of serious absurdist-surreal lyrical imagery and semi-depressing avant-progressive/jazz dirges. And it's great stuff.

"66 Deadhead Spies" follows with an erratic-yet-composed RIO-ish style, with awkward Henry Cow-ish time-changes, Cutler-type

percussive agility, piano and freaky synth. "Starling" is a fairly dreary bit with dub-bass, brass-section, a psychotic avant-jazz

meltdown and a chorus that sticks in the head, provided by one of the group's women (of which there are a few). "Mike's Hind" is the

album's token psychedelic freak-out jam, similar to the last album's "Butter Fairy", but shortened - a creepy bass-line, crawling

drawn-out single-note horn lines like something from Zappa's '68/'69 squonkers and grooved-out drum-fills with whispery cymbals.

"Hecho En" is a slow dramatic accordion-led march with more great melodic (though never cute) femme vocals, and there's an

apocalyptic theatrical feel with the lyrics referring to the land's natives and the prancing, cross-dressing, intruding white men.

"Spine Delay" starts with a quite strange and surprising hip-hop opening, though the rap is backed by tripped-out 'tronics and wacky

horns. It all segues into another somber, dare-I-say, depressing dirge, this time with co-ed vox. "Bara" comes on like some crazed

scary Faust freak-out, goes into soft spacey keys and another co-ed vocal proclaiming amusing, somewhat twee lines about a

trans-global horn-playing couple sampling each other... then the doomy Faust bit comes on again. "Eight Inch Nun" ends it all with a

super-cosmic trance bit (not referring to the electronica sub-genre) with more sustained-note trumpet, deep echoing drums, general

ambience and a spittle-miked male vocal that usually makes me want to tear something or someone to bits, unfortunately. Just an

arbitrary pet-peeve, I guess.

Anyway, this album grew on me like some scummy urban Portland lichen. If I were to get academic on you, I guess I might say:“

(leaning back in swivel-chair in an office, literary bookcase in background, fingers connected to form a triangle, bushy beard):

"Rollerball... keeps the irony of their lyrics, titles and imagery in check... with the seriousness of the music itself.

Could appeal to

college/indie-rock people, progressive types and the freak scenes between.""

-- Chuck Rosenberg, Aural Innovations

"After eight albums of jazz-infused post-folk droning, Real Hair sees Rollerball moving towards more conventionally structured songwriting. It's a bold move, and it proves to be a wildly successful one, showing a band finally becoming interested in communicating their ideas to an audience. Rollerball's earlier studio albums have teetered on the brink of self-conscious pomposity, sorely lacking the humor & directness of their live shows. It's good to see them loosen up in the studio as well, braving the conventions of space-y art-folk. There are enough traces of their former albums on here, but the true gems are the discomfiting doo-wop neo-folk of songs like "Girls Hugging Trees" and "Starling," wonderful tracks showing both the constant evolution and the disconcerting stability of a band always searching out new directions. The male/female vocal interchanges, the tumbling percussion, the saxophones and clarinets pushed to the front all go together to create some of Rollerball's most focused, controlled work to date, without losing any of the band's inherent playfulness and open-endedness. Rollerball has, perhaps paradoxically, expanded their scope by focusing on more conventional songwriting, proving able to retain their playfulness at the same time they're approaching the parameters of established folk-rock structures."

-- Stein Haukland, Comes With A Smile

"Let's put it simply: Real Hair takes Rollerball to a new level. This album manages to retain the lo-fi/experimental feel of earlier efforts while being better produced, better written, and more sharply focused. Studio experimentation is still a major feature, but it is now embedded in tight rock songs that blend lo-fi/noise rock, alternative, ska/reggae, and avant-prog elements. "Girls Hugging Trees" opens with a delicate trio call from accordion, saxophone and trumpet, before "Mini Wagonwheel's" bass riff kicks in. Once the melody enters, it becomes obvious that Real Hair is a few steps ahead in terms of arrangements than any previous Rollerball album. "66 Deadhead Spies" has at its core a very nice piano melody, its slight quirkiness allowing for strange developments to spiral out of its medium tempo. "Eight Inch Nun" has the slow pace and foggy improv feel of a Supersilent track. "Starling" adopts a reggae feel, making good use of the group's small horn section, and the song sounds like it could hit the airwaves -- until all hell break loose in the bridge section, where the horn section tears the cue sheet, shredding tonality to pieces. These are only a few of the delightful quirks in Real Hair. Each piece holds its surprises, but the biggest one is to find the group in such top compositional shape. That and the fact that they pull it off without ever compromising their edge. Essential American alternative rock."

-- François Couture, All Music Guide

"Rollerball is one of those bands that I've always enjoyed a great deal, but never came around to exploring as much as I would have liked to. This is actually the ninth full-length release from this Portland, Oregon ensemble & although having not heard everything from their back catalogue, this is easily the most structured work I've heard from them yet. But fans of their slightly deranged jazz streaked expeditions don't need to worry because we get plenty of sax, trumpet, & clarinet blare mixed with gurgling synth & spacey keyboards, but to tell you the truth there's just as much accordion, piano, & Amanda Mason Wiles' angelic voice to latch on to. The use of accordion & keys provides an almost cabaret feel in a Jeremy Barnes kind of way, but just like with Jackie-O Motherfucker, previous label mates on Road Cone (which sadly has ceased operations), Rollerball is all about organics, texture & surprisingly sonic gestures. Add to all this the occasional drone, samples, hip hop beats & deep audio experimentation & you know we're in for an adventurous jazz listen. This is jazz for the ones who enjoy staring at the sky, exploring the space from a comfortable distance."

-- Mats Gustafson, The Broken Face

"El manejo de las trompetas al inicio de "Girls Hugging Trees" así como la voz y en general el track le dan un extraño mood casi oscuro al inicio de este material de Rollerball, que de entrada con el uso de todos los instrumentos indica música a la que debería ponerse atención. El disco aunque extraño, resulta interesantísimo. A veces la sección de viento (trompetas, clarinetes) llega a generar sonidos casi cacofónicos que por momentos podrían desquiciar y sin embargo, Rollerball los hace caber en su música. "Starling" llega a tener un sentido retro, gracias a la voz femenina (sin saber si es Mae, Amanda o Madame) Escuchen los sonidos que le arrancan a los vientos estas mujeres en "Mike's Hind" con los sonidos sincopados y casi desafinados, en ocasiones del piano, como para oscurecer el ambiente. La batería y el bajo realizando su trabajo eficientemente, como a lo largo de todo el disco. Interesantísimo track. El acordeón aparece como instrumento central en "Hecho En", un track que se despega un poco del resto, de nuevo gracias a la voz femenina y en este caso, al mismo acordeón. ¡Cómo saca sonidos y partido de sus instrumentos cada miembro de la banda! Uno de mis tracks favoritos del disco. Pongan atención al cambio en la segunda mitad del track... ¡muy bueno! "Spine Delay" lo hace de nuevo manejando samples, sonidos, sonidos ambientales y distorsiones de los instrumentos (escuchen la introducción del track). Después de los desquiciantes primeros 2 minutos, el track entra en un ambiente casi religioso (pongan atención a la modulación de las voces), para finalizar de nuevo en una cacofonía a base de distorsiones que son capaces de

manejar dentro del track sin que salga de balance.

En "Bara" la banda recrudescer más su post rock, arrancando en un experimento que luego a base de voces trata de llevar por otros

rumbos, acompañados de teclados y el siempre buen trabajo de la sección rítmica, pasando por experimentos sonoros y vocales

(incluidos sí, gritos desesperantes).

"Eight Inch Nun" finaliza con un sonido entre industrial, post, experimental, de performance (con todo y monólogo), todo un

misterio, interesante y perturbador a la vez.

Una banda que habrá que seguir y revisar su evolución"

--Ciro Velázquez, Eufonia