

# MURDER BY DEATH

Adam Turla: Vocals, guitar Sarah Balliet: Cello, keyboards  
Matt Armstrong: Bass Dagan Thogerson: Drums, percussion

They may call Bloomington, Indiana, home, but since their 2000 formation, Murder by Death have been a band without musical borders. Theirs is a world where Old West murder ballads mingle with rock-injected Western classicism; where an album's sequencing can take listeners from a haunted back alley in rural Mexico to a raucous Irish pub. All of which is to say, Murder by Death albums don't just string together songs; they create experiences. With their fifth album (and second for Vagrant), *Good Morning, Magpie* (04/06/10), Murder by Death continue the tradition of border expansion that drove career standouts like 2006's *In Bocca al Lupo* and 2008's *Red of Tooth and Claw*. The difference, however, is that this time, the band literally went off the map to get there.

"Going into the woods helped me write in a way I never would've been able to otherwise," says singer/guitarist Adam Turla, recalling the 2009 retreat into the Tennessee mountains during which, armed with little more than a tent, a fishing pole and a notebook, he wrote the 11 songs that would become *Good Morning, Magpie*. "There were days where I'd sit down and write for seven hours, make dinner, and then sit down and write late into the night with my little camp light going: just intense, nonstop sessions of pure writing. I've never worked that way, ever, because with all the business of being a band, I've never had so little to do! Every day I was either cooking, hiking while writing, or writing. I didn't speak to a single person the whole time."

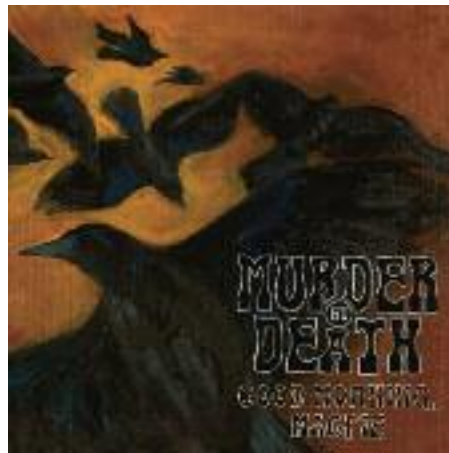
Be that as it may, *Good Morning, Magpie* still speaks volumes. Recorded at Bloomington's Farm Fresh Studios with Jake Belser (who most recently worked with MBD on their all-instrumental soundtrack to Jeff Vandermeer's 2009 book *Finch*), and mixed by Grammy-winning *Red of Tooth and Claw* producer Trina Shoemaker, the album weaves 11 disparate stories into a whole that's unlike anything else in the band's catalog. "These songs definitely come together as an album; we just aren't relying on a concept this time," says Turla, referencing the conceptual storylines that drove Murder by Death's last two albums as well as 2002's *Who Will Survive*, and *What Will Be Left of Them?* "Being out in the woods with no pressure freed me up to explore different moods and different stories, all of which became linked through the experience I had writing them: just that sheer sprint of working in isolation."

With its junk-pile percussion and ramshackle Vaudevillian flow, "You Don't Miss Twice" is the only song on *Good Morning, Magpie* that directly references Turla's time in the woods—but the song's spirit informs much of what surrounds it. "I was telling a friend how I thought this was our most upbeat record, and his reply was, 'Seriously?'" Turla recalls, laughing. "But 'upbeat' doesn't necessarily mean 'happy.' Take a song like 'Yes'—it's got this fun, shuffling beat and this amazingly catchy melody from Sarah [Balliet, cello], but the lyrics are all about accepting death. Or 'Whiskey in the World,' which is basically a sad bastard's lament about how the whiskey that makes this character enjoy life is also what condemns him. That duality between the music and the lyrics is something we haven't done much until now."

Even though it was written in isolation, *Good Morning, Magpie* came together over six weeks of rehearsals back in Bloomington—ultimately marking the first time the band recorded a full-length at home. "We ultimately just decided to record in Bloomington because we had a friend here [Belser] with his own studio, and he'd already done a great job with the *Finch* soundtrack and our B-sides and 7-inches; and we also lucked out and had Trina [Shoemaker] basically making herself available to help us mix whenever we were finished. So then we started thinking, "Man, we have all this time to ourselves; we should just bring in our friends—musicians from Bloomington and Louisville, Kentucky, which is about 75 miles away—and just play parts here and there. It was great—the album ended up with a lot of different instrumentation, and we paid everyone in whiskey."

In keeping with Murder by Death tradition, whiskey also plays muse to a handful of *Good Morning, Magpie*'s songs—including the Balliet-penned opener, "Kentucky Bourbon," which sounds like a Bulleit jingle spun through an old Victrola. But as the album progresses, the songs wind through other locales and moods: from eerie Southern-gothic territory (the creeping, uneasy "White Noise") to an old Spanish cabaret ("On the Dark Streets Below") to the high-noon drama of the title track—itsself inspired equally by Welsh legend (the title references a tale of the magpie as Satan's messenger) and the American West. No mere genre exercise, *Good Morning, Magpie* feels like a travelogue from a band that's logged the miles to write from experience.

"Travel is a big part of this band's reason for being," says Turla, noting that the past few years have seen Murder by Death's passports stamped in Alaska, Greece, Norway and the Italian island of Sardinia, among other far-flung locales. They have challenged their fans to book them all over the world - in as many unique places as possible. "I personally love the sense of variety you get from traveling, and I'm sure that idea influenced the way I approached a lot of these songs. Trying to use different styles and throw in different influences—whether it's the way you turn a phrase or play a certain note—you can suggest different places," he concludes. "That's the fun of fiction; that's the fun of movies, and music can have that effect, too. It's all about being able to transport people to another place."



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