

Ignorance: Tamara Lindeman and the Weather Station sing about “climate grief”

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The new album *Ignorance* marks a departure for Toronto-based musician Tamara Lindeman and her band, the Weather Station. They have been recording acoustic folk albums since 2008, but this is their first album to be released on an American label. Featuring piano, organ, drums, saxophone, percussion and string arrangements, the album features a much fuller sound than the band’s previous efforts.

Ignorance is the product of “a weird winter where I was obsessively reading about climate change,” Lindeman, the band’s songwriter, told the *New York Times*. The 36-year-old musician and former child actor added that she had grown up under the shadow of ecological crisis and that she was experiencing “climate grief.”

Lindeman’s decision to address climate change, one of the greatest dangers of our time, on her new album is a sign of honesty and artistic seriousness. One of art’s crucial roles is to reflect social reality. Yet her approach apparently was not fully conscious. “When I first was writing [this album], I wasn’t even thinking that I was trying to write about [climate change]; it just was what I was writing about,” Lindeman told National Public Radio. “And I even thought, like, ‘People won’t hear this in the music, but I know where it’s coming from.’”

Lindeman’s candid assessment is accurate. On *Ignorance*, her lyrics are oblique enough that her theme is not always apparent to the listener. She uses images such as a bird lighting on the pavement and a world overwhelmed with snow, but they could be read as straightforward appreciations of natural beauty.

The subject, and Lindeman’s attitude toward it, becomes clearer in references to time running out and in expressions of futility. She is not alone in this latter attitude, and it may be legitimate to give it voice. But

such a perspective tends to promote passivity or fatalism.

“Robber,” the album’s opening song, is perhaps the most elliptical. A high-hat pattern introduces the crisp drumming and sustained piano chords that propel the song forward. Saxophone, organ, electric guitar and a string arrangement provide embellishment and create a distinctive setting for a vocal performance.

Lindeman’s singing style, however, is not suited to this accompaniment. Rather than forthright and commanding, her voice, though attractive, is quiet and thin. Her technique alternates between sighs, whispers, falsetto and her natural alto. She does not establish a strong vocal presence, and at times the band overwhelms her. An additional problem is the lack of a strong melody. The opening line, “I never believed in the robber,” provides a hook, but the rest of the melody resembles a meandering improvisation, even an afterthought.

The song’s lyrics may be meant to appear intriguingly ambiguous, yet they fail to connect, partly because of the underdeveloped melody. Lines such as “I figured everything he took was gone,” and “Nothing to do, nothing to be done,” evince pessimism and resignation, which become recurring themes of the album.

Without having read Lindeman’s interview with the *New York Times*, one would not know that the song was inspired by an article about Exxon Mobil. It is notable that Lindeman never names the enemy in this song or any of the others. Although “Robber” is one of the album’s stronger songs, it feels incompletely realized.

To varying degrees, the rest of the album suffers from similar weaknesses. “Tried to Tell You” stands out for its simpler, more straightforward arrangement than the other songs. Its eighth-note pulse recalls the new wave

of the '80s. Its melody is more developed, and Lindeman's singing is more purposeful, though still comparatively gentle. Still, a mood of futility creeps in here too. Lindeman refers to "the fragile idea that anything matters." Soon she sings, "I feel as useless as a tree in a city park, / Standing as a symbol of what we have blown apart."

On "Wear," the band plays more quietly and allows more space for Lindeman's vocals to come forward. But even here, her voice sometimes gets lost in the mix. "I tried to wear the world like some kind of garment," Lindeman sings. But this fanciful effort to commune with nature proves futile. "It does not matter to the world if I embody it," she sighs. In these lines, and in Lindeman's careful enunciation, one hears hints of self-seriousness.

These hints grow stronger in the slow, mournful "Trust." "Dim the lights and draw the curtains, / This is the end of love," Lindeman breathes. Despite the band's restrained and tasteful performance, the song's atmosphere of drama feels faintly contrived. Lindeman also makes the dubious confession, "I wanted to bare my skin to the grass in generosity," which is perhaps a bit pretentious.

The musicians who support Lindeman provide much of the album's interest. The band often achieves a momentum that drives the songs forward. The disco-inflected drumming brings life to many of the songs, and the creative arrangements add color and a contemporary feel. Pizzicato guitar, fluttering saxophone and glowing organ add highlights and texture without becoming obtrusive.

Lindeman is a more affecting vocalist when she sings in her natural range, especially during the rare moments when she lets her guard down. The songs have more force when she is transformed momentarily from an ethereal presence into a woman of flesh and blood. The problem seems to be that she has not yet recognized that the style of singing that works alongside a fingerpicked guitar does not work atop a full band.

The perspective that Lindeman's lyrics convey is that of an intelligent, sensitive person with good intentions and a guilty conscience. Her resignation and grief may result from a sense of being overwhelmed by the gravity of climate change. This is not a personal failing or individual weakness. It also expresses some of the current difficulties, after decades in which mass social

struggle and opposition—which alone represent an answer to the current ecological disasters—have been suppressed.

By addressing a serious global crisis, Lindeman has responded in her art to the world as it is, which is a positive step. The development of a more combative spirit, which also depends on processes and events outside her, would strengthen her art.



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