The Fiery Furnaces - Bitter Tea

Contributed by Glen Sarvady

The Fiery Furnaces
Bitter Tea
[Fat Possum]
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That grating sound you hear is the patience of a rabid fan's downshifting gears - or it could be the music giving rise to that reaction. The Fiery Furnaces' momentum hit a speed bump last fall with Rehearsing My Choir, the Friedberger siblings' much-maligned collaboration with their 86-year-old grandmother. Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger had intended Choir as a bonus disc to accompany Bitter Tea, and Rough Trade's insistence on issuing it as a standalone (and the resultant outsized fallout) probably explains their change in labels. Eleanor's assessment of Bitter Tea as "definitely the poppiest thing we've done" offered hope it would prove the chaser offsetting the sting of Choir's outsider density, reconnecting the band to a historic high of fascinating recordings and incendiary live shows.

Not so fast - those declaring this a full return to form are either skimming off the highlights or harboring a virulent grandma aversion. Tea's first half closely resembles Choir in both structure and anachronistic instrumentation, continuing a phase Eleanor jokingly called "tack piano Devo." The disc's second half picks up markedly but still often plays like a second-string version of Blueberry Boat, its abrupt shifts and hurtling calliope synths sounding like gimmickry rather than the past earmarks of songs giddily stuffed to the gills with ideas.

Persevere deep enough into Bitter Tea and you'll unearth the true gems. "Police Sweater Blood Vow" may be the most irresistible melody they've written (forget the willfully obtuse title - it's the showstopper with the "vibrate, buzz buzz, ring and beep" chorus they've played at their past two Atlanta stops, each time in dramatically different versions). "Benton Harbor Blues" is nearly as good, successfully branching out to a Motown groove - and its uncluttered remix at disc's end further ups the ante, providing a clarity approaching the amazing Single Again EP. The second iteration of "Nevers" similarly benefits, excising the first take's bothersome backwards tracking - a tactic used effectively in the past but suddenly done way to excess.

Bitter Tea is far from worthless - it's so damn long that these highlights along with a few other winners (such as the uneasy blend of romance and gurgling tension on "Teach Me Sweetheart") would have made a solid 35-minute album. In their quest to make challenging music, however, the Fiery Furnaces are increasingly coming up with exasperating music instead.