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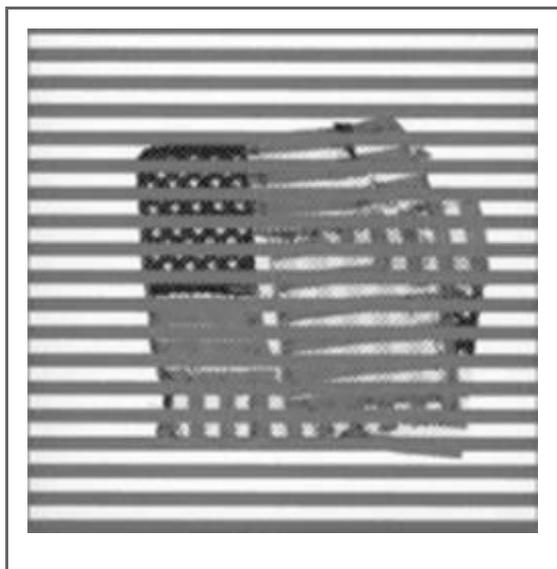


Tortoise

Standards (Thrill Jockey)

By Jessica Parker

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The first discordant moment of *Standards*, the latest album from Tortoise, signals a new direction for the Chicago instrumentalists. Actually, it's as if Tortoise has not only changed directions but run the train completely off the track, the resulting sound being the freight engine barreling through pine and brush. The first two minutes of said track, "Seneca," play like Jimi Hendrix distorting the national anthem at Woodstock--raucous, fuzzed-up electric noise.

(Coincidentally, a skewed American flag adorns the cover of *Standards*.) Drums beaten to a pulp, cymbals crashing louder than jets and an ambling electric guitar segue into a tight drum solo, bumping bass and an ornate harpsichord melody sharpened with handclaps. Brilliant. "Seneca" is a perfect mission statement to a near-perfect album. Like Radiohead, Tortoise exists in its own world, working from the inside out. The band takes cues from other genres, true, but emerges

with a sound uniquely its own. *Standards* is the kind of album that demands to be heard through headphones so every scratch, effect and pin drop can be absorbed through the ears into the bones.

You always knew they could do it. It just seemed inevitable that Tortoise would let loose on its funk tendencies and produce an album as percussive and provocative as *Standards*. Percussionist/studio genius John McEntire's funky, elastic production for Stereolab hinted that this white man could groove. A few other projects along the way, including the *Warp Back to Earth* Peter Thomas tribute, demonstrated McEntire's studio wizardry. Even *TNT*, Tortoise's 1999 effort, at times strayed from the pensive post-rock trademarked by these art-rock auteurs. For example, "The Equator" was a perfect Pac-Man/ELO/Ry Cooder hybrid--at the time completely unexpected from the serious ensemble. "Almost Always is Nearly Enough" was an abrasive, Aphex Twin-like foray into drum and bass. *Standards* picks up where *TNT* left off; mallets poised, computer cued, bass amped.

It was only a matter of time before the sanitary gloves and lab coats were abandoned for break beats and Adidas. *Standards* is an exceptionally well-produced album, but that doesn't mean it's all math and shrink-wrap. To the contrary, *Standards* is so tight it's loose. You can *feel* the bass with your whole body, and you'll be bobbing more than your head. Though obviously computer-crafted, the album is less brain, more body. While *TNT* sometimes sounded like a live band jamming (as on the title track), *Standards* sounds more like an electronic collage with its stuttering machines, disjointed loops and random noise bursts. Instead of coming off messy and laborious, *Standards* sounds perfectly arranged. It will be interesting to hear it replicated live. No surprise, really, that the album is so chock full of instruments and sound. McEntire built Soma Studios, where *Standards* was produced, and according to the Web site (www.somastudios.com), he has more electronic toys than Elton John has sunglasses. Track two, "Eros," comes complete with burping synthesizers and those

sweet marimbas Tortoise has faithfully resurrected from '60s bossa nova. Yet the album still retains the lovely jazz aesthetic the band has crafted over the years; it's just taking second stage to the roof-raising percussion in front. Like nearly every track on the ironically titled *Standards*, "Benway" features buzzing, fluorescent synthesizer, staccato snare and throbbing bass. "Monica" is the finest example of gloriously sustained synth, shimmering like a disco ball. Tortoise still makes pretty, pensive Euro-jazz as on "Firefly," a leisurely walk down a dimly lit street. "Firefly" slides into "Six Pack," picking up the pace before morphing into bouncy electro-pop. "Blackjack" travels at hyperspeed, the peppiest epic on this ride. While the cyclical rhythms of "Eden 1" and "Eden 2" resonate like the hum of gridlocked traffic, "Speakeasy" mirrors its title, the most typical, surprise-free Tortoise song on the album. If this is Tortoise's new standard, I can't wait to see what it'll do next.

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