



MAKING TRACKS: FAUN FABLES' DAWN MCCARTHY AND NILS FRYKDAHL. PHOTO: BRIDGET BELL

HISTORY TRAIN

Faun Fables' Subway Theater

Words: Jesse Ashlock

The cluttered, decrepit RV parked outside the Lower East Side rock club Tonic doubles as the greenroom for Faun Fables' Dawn McCarthy and Nils Frykdahl. As water boils for tea, the two slather on makeup and slip into elaborate costumes as they prepare for the New York City debut of the heavily theatrical live show for *The Transit Rider* (Drag City), their fourth album. It's a return of sorts for McCarthy, a Spokane native who moved to New York 12 years ago to study illustration at SVA – and sing in various local bands and theaters – and became fascinated by an idea of the subway system as a submersive world in which machines exert complete dominance over human beings. "Imagine if the subway was the only world you had," she says. "What would love be like in this setting? How would you have friendships? What kind of work would you do?"

With that world in mind, she penned three folk songs, which would one day become the basis for *The Transit Rider*. McCarthy left New York in 1997 and traveled Europe and the US performing solo as Faun Fables – an alias which combines a childhood nickname with a lifelong interest in folklore – until meeting Frykdahl, a prolific Bay Area artist who's now her partner in music and life, and moving to Oakland. Together on 2001's *Mother Twilight* and 2003's *Family Album*, they shaped Faun Fables' sound, an organic mix of ethereal balladry and discordant theatrics, inscribed by European and American folk traditions and Weimar cabaret, Frykdahl's melodramatically sinister vocals balanced by McCarthy's haunting gypsy soprano.

But those subway songs stayed in the back of McCarthy's mind all the while. And since the train song is almost as integral to musical tradition as the love song, it's an ideal form for artists so rooted in history. Both musicians also gravitate towards theater, especially musical theater – Frykdahl

cites the dark strength of Brecht, bursting into a snatch of *The Threepenny Opera*, while McCarthy, who trained last summer with the experimental Polish troupe Gardzienice, exclaims, "I remember seeing Dick Van Dyke as a chimney sweep in *Mary Poppins*, and that was just it for me! I wanted to be him when I grew up." So they decided to stage McCarthy's train songs, constructing a story about a rosy naïf with dreams of an Edenic picnic site who finds herself trapped in a totalitarian subway system. *The Transit Rider* enjoyed a sold-out run at San Francisco's Dance Mission Theater, and the new album is an adaptation of that show, featuring a number of new songs that address the theme of travel more broadly, including a lively version of the Anglo-Saxon traditional "House Carpenter" and a smoky, incantatory take on the Polish stage composer Zygmunt Konieczny's "Taki Pejaz."

The duo also wanted to take the stagershow on the road, so they bought the RV and recruited fellow Bay Area act the Fuzzy Cousins for support. Now, one might argue that there are two kinds of people in the world, the thespians and the non-thespians, and the latter may not take well to Faun Fables' neo-Vaudevillian ambitions. Indeed, their live show doesn't entirely survive the transition from the stage to the less rarified environs of the rock club, stumbling in places. But McCarthy is winning as the titular protagonist, and Frykdahl, barely recognizable in a fat suit and heavy paint, nails his dual roles as an odious, wisecracking vagrant and an omniscient train conductor. Above all else, the music itself, as wild and mysterious and unexpected as a dream, translates beautifully. The show also offers an experience that's too rare today: of performers completely immersed in a world of their own invention, delighted by every minute of it.

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