

ANDREW BIRD

biography

“Bird and his army of violins have made a musical universe that no one else inhabits, and unless Django Reinhardt and Syd Barrett record together, ain't nobody gonna be joining him anytime soon.”

—*Ink 19*

“Somewhere between Talking Heads and a dusty old 78, Bird’s take on obscure European folk and wonderfully domestic pop and blues is ridiculously assured and unfailingly enjoyable.”

—*The Onion*

Andrew Bird is a man of constant surprise. The instant some hapless journalist on a deadline attempts to pigeonhole him in any kind of tidy, one-dimensional category, he changes direction and creates new music that defies the description. He’s been tagged at various points in his career as a neo-traditionalist, a maverick experimenter, a Beatlesque pop/psychedelic revivalist, and a creator of ambient soundscapes, among other things. But none of those catchphrases does justice to the full span of his musical vocabulary. The simple truth is this: Andrew Bird creates sounds on his own terms, and as far-ranging as his various incarnations may appear, they are remarkably consistent when it comes to clarity of purpose, craftsmanship, wit, and sheer audience appeal. Whether his subject matter is love, loneliness, or topics a little more slippery, a typical Bird song (if there is any such thing) demands your attention from the first moment you hear it, and rewards you with sheer sonic bliss.

Andrew Bird was born in Chicago, a town where blues, jazz, post-rock, alt country and other genres have long rubbed shoulders. From an early age, he sensed that popular music has a history far broader and deeper than the Top 40 charts of the moment, and that some of the best of it was performed before he was born or with instruments other than the electric guitar.

Speaking of instruments, Bird is a master of many (including a mean whistle), but the violin was his first love. He plucks its strings like a guitar, he samples and overdubs its output onstage, and he continues to find ways to expand the sounds this pre-digital device can produce. Exploring its limitless possibilities has led him everywhere from Ravel to the Carter Family, from Xenakis and Górecki to Joseph Spence and Charley Patton, and from Latin rhythms to Ethiopian groove in his quest to create what he calls “3 1/2-minute pop songs informed by a non-pop universe.” While he first achieved widespread recognition for his work as a sideman with the Squirrel Nut Zippers in the mid-90s, his guest

appearances on albums by Neko Case, Kelly Hogan, and Throwing Muses leader Kristin Hersh suggest still more dimensions of his talent.

On his own releases (*Music of Hair* [1996], *Thrills* [1998], *Oh! The Grandeur* [1999], *The Swimming Hour* [2001], *Fingerlings* [2002], and *Weather Systems* [2003]), he continues to garner praise as a confident and evocative vocalist whose

phrasing is a perfect fit for the lilting melodies and poetic lyrics he writes. During his years with backing band Bowl of Fire and now as a solo artist (often joined by drummer Kevin O'Donnell, founder of post-bop sextet Quality Six, and guitarist and singer Nora O'Connor, formerly of The Aluminum Group and The Blacks), Bird has enchanted live audiences and inspired album reviewers to new heights of rapturous creativity. Take this example from Toronto’s *NOW Magazine*: “Bird and his fiery friends have thrown out the rules and are now stroking madly with everything they’ve got. Irish ragas, Indian rumbas, Cuban jigs and other mind-melting mutations yet to be classified, all



photo by David Mitchell

busted out with full-tilt garage-band gusto.” Then again, by the time those words hit print, the man they were meant to describe was surely already plotting his next musical action adventure.



ANDREW BIRD

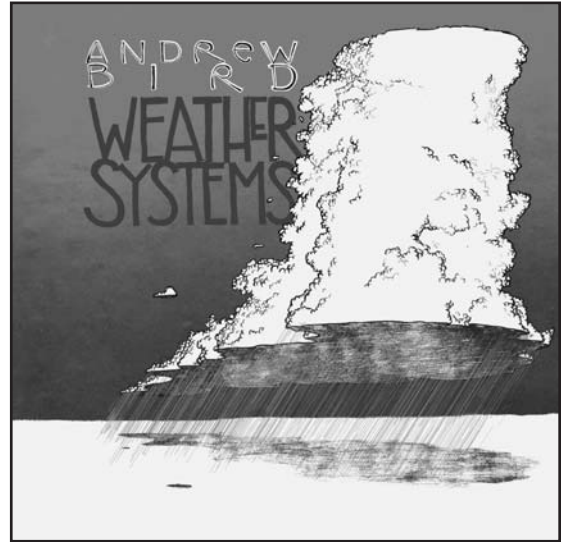
album reviews

CMJ
NEW MUSIC
MONTHLY

by Steve Ciabattoni

Geographically and chronologically, songwriter/fiddler Andrew Bird records just outside of Chicago in the 21st century, but the ever-changing moods of *Weather Systems* strongly suggest that this is music from another place and another time. Over four solo albums, Bird has increasingly broadened his violin's vocabulary beyond the literal quotes from folk, blues, and swing [...]. There is still a love of those song forms and an "old timey" atmosphere at play on *Weather Systems*, most notably amid the lonely cowboy waltz "First Song," which is punctuated by one of the album's many whistling solos—yes, whistling. But chiefly, Bird concentrates on **using his violin as a character actor able to serve many roles and supply many moods**. The album's boldest instrumental, "Skin," lets Bird brood a bit, slashing out amplified plucks and riffs on violin and mandolin over a swampy, minor-key blues vamp. On the title track, Bird relies more on elegance, from delicate pizzicato to layers of velvet harmonies, built up as a result of Bird cloning himself into a string quartet.

Weather Systems may only last barely half an hour, but as it passes over, it showers you with ample evidence of Bird's expanding skill.



Rolling Stone

by Mark Woodlief

Violinist/vocalist Andrew Bird—once known mainly as a swing revivalist, both as a sometime-member of Squirrel Nut Zippers and as leader of his own Bowl of Fire outfit—has matured. His music is now more intimate, more personal and much more contemporary. But *Weather Systems* still occasionally draws upon ghosts, as when Bird elegantly channels Jeff Buckley on the title track. But the nine-song effort is **the clearest distillation of Bird's own style to date**. Brief, almost interstitial instrumentals ("Skin," and the untitled Tracks 5 and 9) have the atmospheric feel of soundtrack work, while the rolling "Lull" features a lovely duet with Bowl of Fire's Nora O'Connor. "I fascinate myself when I'm all alone," they sigh on the song's chorus. Fortunately, Bird's just as intriguing with us.

“An idiosyncratic genius, violin visionary Andrew Bird[’s] new CD is a gorgeous, glorious experiment in stripped-down American art rock.”

—Riverfront Times (St. Louis, MO)



ANDREW BIRD

album reviews

Phoenix.COM

by Carly Carioli

Editor's Pick: There was a time, only a couple of years ago, that the violin prodigy Andrew Bird was a bit of a musical Luddite. When he came to popular notice for his role in the Squirrel Nut Zippers, and later with his own combo Bowl of Fire, he was more than a little preoccupied with the sound of American popular song up to World War II while professing ignorance of the musical heritage of the second half of the 20th century. He's come a long way in a couple of years, taking on the rock era (not to mention the post-rock era) on 2001's fanciful *Swimming Hour* (Rykodisc) and now supporting a new mini-album, titled *Weather Systems*, that veers from country-ish folk to spaced-out, synthesizer-heavy gypsy-rock hybrids. He even employs a sampler in concert. **An emerging master at enabling the 21st century to speak to the 20th.**

MAXIM
ONLINE.COM

by David Peisner

[*Weather Systems*...] A moody, atmospheric album that takes the focus off of Bird's ability to revitalize a broad range of aging musical styles and puts it squarely on his **impressive chops as an affecting singer-songwriter**. Guitars, violins, and a foreboding rhythm stalk through the relentlessly dark and bluesy "I." There's a breezier feel to the instrumental "Skin," where a flatulent organ gives a nice low-end punch to the playful string section. Bird doesn't really force himself on us as a singer, but his voice comes across with a quiet authority. "I'm in a lull," he sings on "Lull," harmonizing with vocalist Nora O'Connor, while plucking out a gentle melody on a violin. If so, it's one hell of a lull.

"[...] Genius underground pop songwriting and execution, a languorous, tender and poignant assembly of ballads and almost intense melodies that occasionally travel by country roads."

—Chicago New City



ANDREW BIRD

features

Daily Herald

Andrew Bird Finds Musical Garden in Rural Life

April 3, 2003

by Mark Guarino

Ghostly whistling opens Andrew Bird's newest album while a choir of fiddles flutters away like birds. Then a guitar is slowly fingered, picking up the tempo, leading to his opening lyric. "Then it was dusk in Illinois," he murmurs. You swear you can see stalks of corn, swaying in a field.

In just a few moments, Bird has set the mood for a lonely Midwestern night where, sitting under the stars, the most miniscule sounds are music.

This intoxicating album was conceived, naturally, on a farm in the tiny town of Elizabeth, Ill., (pop. 650) in the northwest corner of the state near the Mississippi River. Bird moved there a year ago, settling into a family farm that today raises mostly soybeans, cows and corn. His parents live in town a few miles away. Living alone, he converted the 1890s barn into a recording studio. His daily routine consists of getting up, making coffee, selecting a couple of eggs from the chickens, cooking up an omelet and then getting to the music. In other words, a world apart from his former apartment on Chicago's North Side. "It is extreme, I must admit," he said recently. "But the things I got out of it have been totally valuable."

Weather Systems is the result of the change. The opening song takes its lyric from *First Song*, a poem by Pulitzer Prize winner Galway Kinnell. It imagines three boys making music in the corn, one boy waking his "heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy." The Zen-like isolation of rural life, at once beautiful and sad, permeates these nine songs. Bird's violin is recorded so it sounds like a lush string quartet. Other times, it twists into an exotic dance. On "Skin," an electric guitar and drums bustle together a rhythm while his fiddle and whistle sew a melody above. The romantic detachment in his voice is similar to Radiohead's Thom Yorke. The album's landscape is patched together through short interludes, lively melodies and mysterious textures.

It's a far distance from the days Bird was a touring fiddler for swing music revisionists Squirrel Nut Zippers. He joined the group after graduating in 1995 from Northwestern where he studied classical violin. He soon got his own record deal with Rykodisc, which released three albums. While the first two were also flavored in hot jazz, the third album, *The Swimming Hour* from 2001, was an ambitious push in a more contemporary pop and soul music direction.

"With the first two records I thought 'I like that music, I want to write songs in that style.' That's how I got started. Instead of moving

into the next style, I wanted to move into a different way of thinking about music," he said.

Instead of following conventional song structure, Bird started thinking of music that wasn't exactly complete but instead had the capability to "fade in and out" and reoccur throughout the record as a theme. "I'm always restricting myself from developing certain themes and ideas instrumentally because (before) I was mainly concerned with writing really effective songs that keep solos short and instrumentals short," he said. "But oftentimes I have more to say than I think I do. I thought that I'd like to indulge these themes and stretch them out a bit."

The new songs stick to the average song length, but they blend together so that the entire 34-minute album becomes one complete piece.

Escaping the apartment life helped Bird create "a more open sound" as well. He created the demos in the barn, inviting Chicago singer Nora O'Connor out to Elizabeth to sing harmonies along with longtime drummer Kevin O'Donnell. Instead of recording the entire album in the barn on his computer, he went to Nashville to work with Mark Nevers, producer and guitarist with the enigmatic country group Lambchop, who helped capture the album's quiet intensity with atmospheric electronics.

Bird's time on the farm may be numbered. At home only about ten days at a time, he is constantly on tour, performing with O'Donnell's jazz group Quality Six, doing session work in Chicago and Nashville and also taking these songs on the road solo (at the Old Town School Saturday, he'll be joined by O'Connor and O'Donnell). For his own tour, he is figuring out how to play the songs by himself on fiddle, guitar, pedal effects and of course, whistling.

Bird is self-releasing *Weather Systems* right now, but in June it will be reissued and distributed by Righteous Babe, the successful independent label run by songwriter Ani DiFranco. A year ago, he asked Rykodisc to exit the label after they started going in the direction of a major label and wanted to sell higher numbers. "I'd be really happy selling 30,000 to 40,000 records but they were like 'You're thinking too small.' I'd rather be ambitious within the independent network than go with the slightly larger thing," he said.

As for moving on from the farm, he said he wants to wait it out, "out of the respect for the work that went into" making the album there. But "I'm also careful not to delude myself too far that this is the way to be," he said.

For the time being, it makes sense to come home to Elizabeth. "There are people who constantly need the allusion they are not alone, who need to hear noise, even if it's static, to keep the demons out. When you go out on your own like this, it becomes very apparent what it is that actually makes you fulfilled or happy. You find that out. It's been a very anti-social experiment."



ANDREW BIRD

features

PITTSBURGH
Tribune-Review

Trying to Nail Down the Music of Andrew Bird is Like Trying to Catch His Namesake With Your Bare Hands

April 18, 2003

by Micheal Machosky

Bird, a virtuoso violinist who fronts a genre-hopping rock band, improvises like a jazzman, can instantly recall dead genres of the past like a musicologist, and can even whistle like Charlie "Bird" Parker blew sax. He also makes pop-based music as eclectic and original as anything going right now.

"I'm just trying to write the music that I don't hear on records," says Bird, who will perform Saturday at Club Cafe on the South Side. "I may listen to some Brazilian music, and say, 'I dig that, but I wish it was doing this.' I'm trying to write a pretty concise pop song, but just bring elements into it that aren't in pop music as we know it."

Bird gained notoriety outside his native Chicago as a sometime-member of the Squirrel Nut Zippers, the flagship band of the short-lived swing craze, who transcended its faddish aspects with wildly original takes on defunct genres such as Gypsy jazz, Dixieland, ragtime, vaudeville, jump blues and early swing. But despite the Zippers' popularity, Bird never lost sight of his own band, Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire.

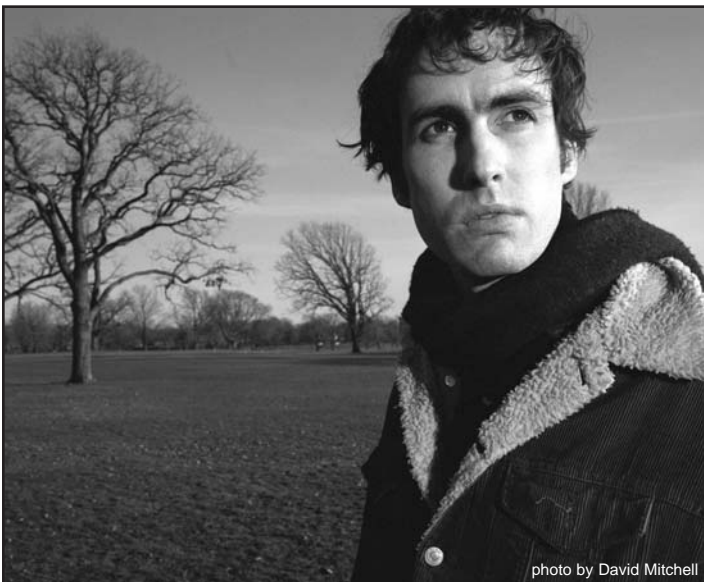


photo by David Mitchell

The Bowl of Fire combined a lingering fascination with the post-war French hot jazz of Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli with Bird's mercurial lyrical vision—which generously borrowed references from the long-gone past, present and Bird's unusual imagination.

"I still get off playing that stuff," Bird says. "But it's more for the house parties, than what I feel that the world needs to hear."

With that in mind, Bird really took flight in 2001 with *The Swimming Hour*, evolving into an almost Beck-like musical chameleon. On that record, raucous garage-rock, Latin jazz, string-band blues and reworkings of old Irish ballads ("Fatal Flower Garden") sit comfortably next to each other, and you can feel Bird stretching his formidable instrumental chops and a unique lyrical voice well past the expected.

With his latest record, *Weather Systems*, Bird has flown a bit further still, trying to break free of the grip of past musical genres altogether.

"My songwriting has gone from, 'I like that. I'm going to write a song like that,' to fewer chords, fewer bridges, fewer intros and outros, but more freedom to bring in other things," Bird says. "If I'm playing with a guitarist, and they go into a 'Western Swing' tune, I'm there. But I get tired of that. I want to keep things more stylistically ... 'sexless,' I guess, would be a good word. Then you have more freedom to inject it with something more unique, more your own."

Bird also likes his lyrics' origins and exact meanings to stay a little hard to place, just like the music. "I think it's really hard to write story-songs," Bird explains. "Because you have less choice of words that sound good. If you can do it, and pull it off, and it all sounds good, that's great. But once you've heard the story, you tend to get tired of the song."

"I like lyrics that are a little more open-ended, open to interpretation, a little more surreal," he adds. "I like lyrics that are really understated and simple, but subtly bizarre."

This attitude actually helps a lot when writing songs. "I write the melody before I have lyrics," Bird says. "I will rarely sacrifice a melody line for a particular word. If that word doesn't fit, I'll just look for another. It's all about the sound of the word, to me. I think the songs have meaning more in an accidental, subconscious kind of way."



ANDREW BIRD

features

NOW

Fearsome Fiddler Gets his Freak On

By **TIM PERLICH**

April 19, 2001

It's a long way from geeky to funky, but somehow string savant Andrew Bird has made the transition. The change here isn't technical — whether he's sawing off with the swingers in Squirrel Nut Zippers or with his own sizzling Bowl of Fire combo, Bird's chops are beyond reproach. It's conceptual. In the past, virtuosic 27-year-old violinist Bird used his sponge-like facility to absorb the defining traits of whatever music crossed his path, from Argentine tangos to Appalachian breakdowns.

But his songs often seemed like academic exercises in ethnomusicology. With his *Swimming Hour* disc, Bird and his fiery friends have given up the history lessons, thrown out the rules and are now stroking madly with everything they've got. This ain't no Stephane Grappelli trip. We're talking 21st-century Irish ragas, Indian rumbas, Cuban jigs and other mind-melting mutations yet to be classified, all busted out with full-tilt garage-band gusto. The influence of controlled substances has not been ruled out.

"Much of the new material was written after a fateful visit to New Orleans," confesses Bird with a sly smile. "I fell in with a weird crowd with a self-destructive streak and, um, a lot of crazy shit happened. I can't really get into the details, but I started writing these funky, physical songs unlike anything I'd done before."

"Hanging out with other musicians has helped me open up to the beauty of a three-minute pop tune where everything fits perfectly into place. As an outlet for all the sounds and rhythms stored up in my head, the pop-song format offers endless possibilities."

It sounds kinda nutty to hear Bird blab on about the wonders of the pop ditty with the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a just-thawed caveman in a video arcade, but to Bird, pop music is no less stunning a revelation.

Until nine months ago, when he inadvertently wandered into a record store on the way home and picked up a copy of the *Soft Bulletin* album by the Flaming Lips he'd heard someone mention, Bird had never owned any contemporary popular music. Nada.

From the time he was handed a violin at the age of four, Bird was the boy in the classical bubble. Even while his college classmates were digging the Sisters of Mercy, Bird never got any closer to goth than Mozart's *Requiem*. "I've been completely out of the pop music loop for most of my life. It began with the Suzuki method, this Japanese study discipline that swept the U.S. in the early 70s, where you learn music by ear at the age of three or four like you would a language. It was a pretty hardcore moulding experience." At least that's what Bird thought until his well-meaning

parents shipped him off to the Interlochen music camp in Wisconsin for further shaping. He barely made it out alive.

"That was insanely competitive. The other guys in my cabin were all into Dungeons and Dragons, and one of them tried to choke me to death. After five weeks my parents came to visit and were told they couldn't see me. They were, like, "Oh, my god, what have we done to our poor son?" and got me out of there quick."

That was really just the beginning of Bird's classical training, which he pursued with a diligence that bordered on obsessive. He pushed himself so hard that his arm gave out in 95, shortly after he finished his studies at Northwestern University. It's only in the last few years that he's been able to come to terms with what he half-jokingly refers to as "my other appendage." "It's pretty hard to convey how intense my relationship was with the instrument," allows Bird, lowering his voice as if it might be listening in from the adjoining room. "I'm still a bit wary of it. I got so wrapped up in the whole mentality of 'if I just practise four more hours' that I had to have my violin with me wherever I went. It almost did me in."

"After playing the thing every day for 22 years, my muscles just atrophied and I could barely move my arm. When the physical rehabilitation wasn't working, I had to undergo a process of deprogramming myself to get to a point where if I could never play the violin again I would be fine."

"I thought back to a time before I became so focused on the instrument and recalled how I used to read and write a lot more. That's when I got deeper into composition. It hit me that no matter what I'm doing technically or stylistically with the violin, if my songs aren't any good, nobody will pay attention anyway."

However psychologically and physically damaging the classical education was for Bird, he appreciates the benefits of the indoctrination process. Learning classical music by ear — as an aural tradition — made it easier to absorb the folk musics of Ireland, Scandinavia and the southern U.S. that all feed the Bowl of Fire's magnificent meltdown.

With the percussive wallop of drummer Kevin O'Donnell, Mighty Blue Kings bass boss Jimmy Sutton and the tasteful twang of Pine Valley Cosmonauts guitarist Andy Hopkins, Bird has finally hit his groove.

"Lately, I've been listening to more New York salsa music from the 60s and 70s, and I found it interesting how the solos, like those in pre-bebop jazz, aren't meant to take you on an aural journey, but to arrive at a point and make a concise statement."

"When I listen to latin music, I hear the rudiments of western classical melody with a kickass rhythm section underneath it."

"Once my ideas start coming, I've found that I can just flow over top of the rhythm. It's not like I'm playing from my record collection any more— it's outside of the typical cultural and historical context. At times, I don't even recognize what's coming out of me, and that's very exciting."

