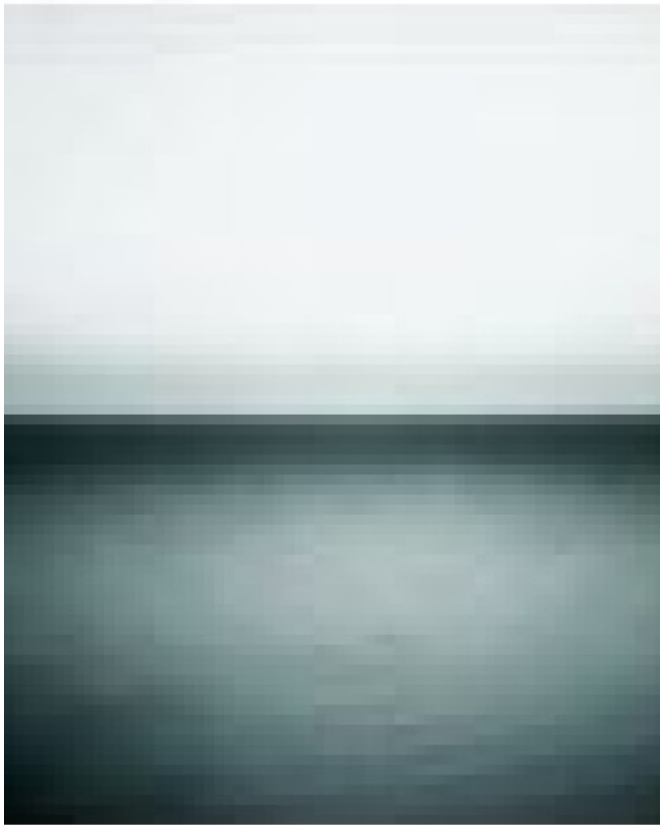


On music

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



No Line on the Horizon

U2

Interscope



Insomniaccomplishments

Jonathan Rundman

Salt Lady



Cada Día un Regalo (Each Day a Gift)

Sol y Canto
MusicAmador



The Imagined Village

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Real World



Maybe Tomorrow

Molly Jenson
Netzwerk

The world's most popular rock band lives in constant contradiction. As U2 itself put it in the 1988 hit "God Part II": "I don't believe in riches, but you should see where I live." The group at times proclaims Christ with power and passion, but it seems equally capable of cunning calculation. In 2004, U2 sold Apple the rights to "Vertigo," which was subsequently played to death on iPod ads. While the hit invoked higher love ("The girl with crimson nails has Jesus 'round her neck"), it foundered from its ties to a ubiquitous gadget. *Chicago Tribune* reporter Mark Caro nailed it: "Its essence has become a jingle, disposable by nature." The girl with crimson nails had buds jammed in her ears, and people stopped listening.

Now comes U2, after three-plus years, with *No Line on the Horizon* (Interscope). Commercial concerns aside, does the album hold up? Or have Bono and company, now pushing 50, lost the spark that ignited *War* and *The Joshua Tree*?

The band enlists the producers behind those records (Brian Eno, Daniel Lanois and Steve Lillywhite); the stark, black-and-white artwork even recalls earlier U2 efforts. The good news: *Horizon* isn't a phoned-in effort. The album marries a crisp lyrical thrust with compressed, driving textures (e.g., in the loops gilding "Moment of Surrender"). If on *Joshua Tree* Bono celebrated "sunshine on my face," then *Horizon* evokes a grayer place of mist and mystery. "I was lost between the midnight and the dawning," sings Bono on "Unknown Caller," a compelling stripped-down, chanted anthem.

Elsewhere, this gray register is less satisfying. The epic-length "Surrender" features fever dreams of subways and stations of the cross, but it lacks a climax à la "With or Without You." And on the Euro-stomping "Magnificent," heralded by an 1980s-vintage synth, Bono sounds self-indulgent as he mulls his musical calling: "From the womb, my first cry, it was a joyful noise."

Horizon ignores musical borders. The compressed, sub-bass snarl of "Get On Your Boots" sounds nothing like the chiming, up-tempo "I'll Go Crazy If I Don't Go Crazy Tonight." The hairpin turns threaten to throw listeners for a loop: "Stand Up Comedy" squeezes funk and rock drum grooves into the same verses, while "FEZ—Being Born" ramrods a slow, sublime dub into a percolating mood piece. Then another gear change, as horns highlight the tremulous traditional tune "White as Snow."

U2 strives to turn it up a notch with this album, but only reaches the next level some of the time. In white-hot stadium rocker "Breathe," a drum avalanche slips into a monstrous see-saw groove sharpened by piano arpeggios. The song tantalizes with what *Horizon* could have been. "Cedars of Lebanon" falls flat; the muffled, middling closer offers a forced illumination: "This shitty world sometimes produces a rose." That fuzzy maxim rounds out a scattershot album.

Other CDs of note:

Jaunty Minneapolis Lutheran-rocker Jonathan Rundman returns with an album spurred by bouts of insomnia. The sleepless nights were worth it, as Rundman demonstrates on a delicious minor-key rock hymn "If You Have a Question": "When

you lie awake at 3 a.m., trouble running through your mind / You don't need to be afraid to ask, you can leave your fear behind." The prolific Rundman delivers 18 solid songs. He's joined by Denver singer-songwriter Beki Hemingway on the tender ballad "I Thought You Were Mine"; listen for the instrumental break teaming toy piano with mellotron.

Spanish rumbas, Cuban boleros and Mexican huapangos are among the forms represented on this gentle, sublime album. The group is anchored by Rosi and Brian Amador. "Ojo por Ojo" ("An Eye for an Eye") weaves sax, piano and classical guitar into a plea against hate ("Every life a miracle / Every day a gift"). The accordion-spiced "Credo" also carries a striking message: "It's not that I'm opposed to any religion / but it shouldn't place itself above reason."

With their distinctly British voices punk-era heroes Paul Weller (The Jam) and Billy Bragg are naturals for this hybrid of English folk instrumentation and song stylings with 21st-century grooves. Weller joins Martin and Eliza Carthy on "John Barleycorn," a ballad that tilts from an acoustic setting toward a heavier, more percussive sound. "Death and the Maiden Retold" feels like a tribal Peter Gabriel track, while Bragg's cockney singing drives the shimmering, shanty-like "Hard Times of Old England Retold."

After building a following in California and Japan, Molly Jenson appears ready for bigger things on this upbeat debut. "Give It Time" gallops from the gates with a head-bopping rock chug that smartly frames Jenson's sunshine rasp (reminiscent of Sheryl Crow). "The Edgy 8 Ball Song" slams harder, with Jenson sounding sleepless as she spits a witty lyric at an ex-confidant: "What a waste of a day / It's the last full one I'll give away / Blah blahbitty blah . . . / Is all I ever hear you say."