

Lonely Avenue, by Ben Folds and Nick Hornby

reviewed by [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue



In Review

DS ADDS MUSIC AND MELODY TO NICK HORNBY

LOVELY AVENUE



(STEREO)

Lonely Avenue

By Ben Folds & Nick Hornby
Nonesuch

On paper, the pairing of piano rocker Ben Folds with witty British literary maverick Nick Hornby sounds great. In his novel *High Fidelity*, Hornby turned to the subject of music, with successful results that balanced the acerbic and the heartfelt. Folds, meanwhile, has managed the neat trick of making the piano cool even to jaded postmoderns. His music bristles with wit, derision and sharp observational power.

Lonely Avenue sounds like a reality TV challenge: can Folds set Hornby's lyrics to music and sing them? It's a fascinating premise, but you can't help wondering how Jack Black, the short-fused record clerk in the film version of *High Fidelity*, would judge the results. To my ears, they're mixed.

The kickoff track is promising. "A Working Day" packs soul and snarl into 111 seconds. You can sense some autobiography as Hornby's narrator ponders his own talent on a rollercoaster of insecurity; he rockets in short order from proclaiming "I can do this, really" to "I mean it and I quit / Everything I write is shit."

Elsewhere, Hornby's lyricism seems to compete with Folds's piano-based settings, with melodic catchiness the loser. "Doc Pomus," cast against a backdrop of polyrhythmic high hat and locomotive keyboard chug, struggles to find its sweet spot. Navigating Hornby's thicket of imagery, Folds loses the tune's scent. And no wonder, with lines like, "And he could never be one of those happy cripples / That smile and tell you life's OK."

And so it goes with much of this album, which recalls beautiful-mess collaborations along the lines of Van Dyke Parks and Brian Wilson. Often Folds grafts his music onto Hornby's words like a sheet-metalworker welding awkward appendages onto an immovable sculpture. While there's no doubting Hornby's verbal grace and punch, *Lonely Avenue* sounds more like a diverting detour than a thoroughfare leading anywhere.