

# Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



### Neon Bible

Arcade Fire

Merge



## **Salvation in Lights**

Mike Farris

Sony



## **Roots & Crowns**

Califone

Thrill Jockey



## **Baby 81**

Black Rebel Motorcycle Club

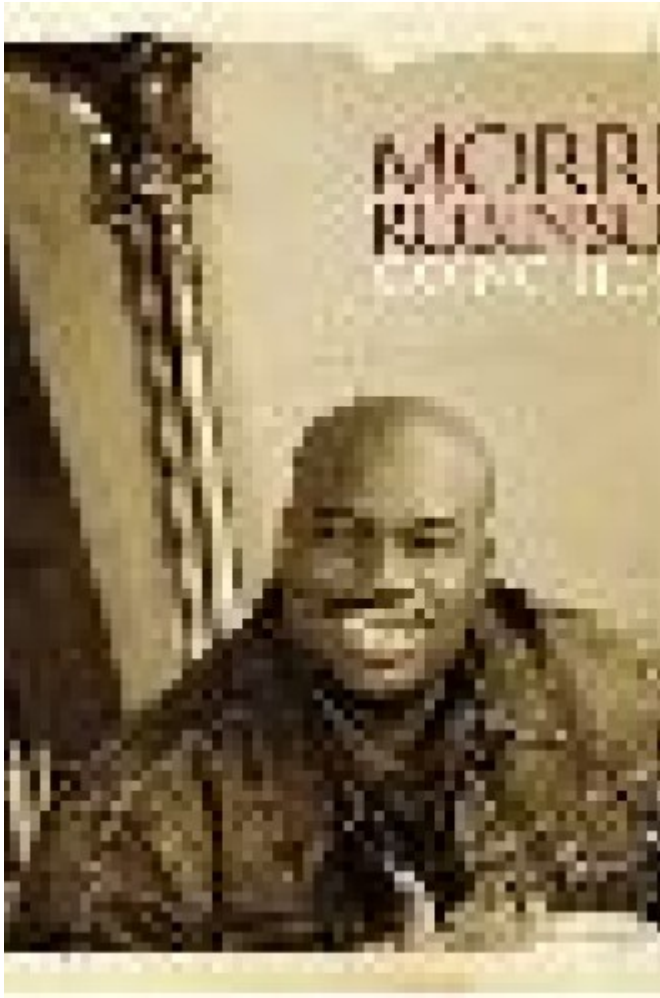
RCA



## **We Walked in Song**

The Innocence Mission

Badman



## Going Home

Morris Robinson  
Decca

David Bowie called them his favorite iPod download. U2 used their song “Wake Up” as the walk-on anthem for their last tour. Coldplay and David Byrne are unabashed fans. Not bad for a band that just debuted its second album.

As *Neon Bible* (Merge) proves, Arcade Fire is as complex as the veiled Christian messages in its music—and worthy of any adventurous listener’s attention. The seven-piece band from Montreal, which includes frontman (and former religious studies major) Win Butler, his wife, Régine Chassagne, and his younger brother Will, recorded the album at a 19th-century red-brick church that the group bought and lived in for the project. And *Neon Bible*—from its title to its coda—appropriates and adorns itself in the sounds, symbols and subjects of Christian culture. In the hands of

lesser artists, this would amount to titillation and contrivance. Here, the results thrill—and chill. The album presents theological and theatrical themes in shapes perhaps more befitting a funhouse than the Father's house. Yet the truth informing this jubilant mishmash of postpunk and symphonic sound ignites each song like a shaft of light.

Much of *Neon Bible* was cut live, with instrumentation that includes a 500-pipe organ, accordion, xylophone, hurdy-gurdy, violin and French horn. The songs are melodic, tight and infectious. The title track creeps along, commenting on religious indoctrination, with a ghoulish female backup chant and double-edged lyrics: "A vial of hope and a vial of pain / In the light they both looked the same / Poured them out onto the world / On every boy and every girl."

"Intervention" presents a stunning, spiraling indictment of how the religious right casts its fortunes with warmongers. Butler, sounding like a cousin of Echo and the Bunnymen singer Ian McCulloch, rages against this hypocrisy: "Who's gonna throw the very first stone? / Oh! Who's gonna reset the bone?" The song "(Antichrist Television Blues)" seems like a Bruce Springsteen rock shuffle as Butler explores the evil of a God-fearing, working-class man who dreams that his teenage daughter will become eye candy on reality TV.

If *Neon Bible* has one drawback, it's that the scope and sound threaten to overload the listener. Yet unlike so many bands that have topped the charts through ambition void of any true invention, Arcade Fire has planted scripture's oldest themes in fresh settings and crafted something new.

Some other notable CDs:

Mike Farris may sound like he soaked his throat in gin for a month, but as he testifies on his latest release, he's two years clean from alcohol and drugs. On *Salvation*, Farris shows a clear debt to the Staples Singers, though the gospel-flavored vocals bear a striking resemblance to those of Jonny Lang—another hard-drinking rocker who went clean and found God. "Oh Mary Don't You Weep" bounces with stomping, old-timey jukejoint blues, while on "Sit Down Servant" Farris exults as if he's in a Mardi Gras promenade heading through the pearly gates.

Sublime loops, electronically bent textures and diced organic sounds create the pieces of this collage-like album. The percolating "Pink and Sour" showcases Califone's vivid non-sequitur lyrics: "Along your skin lost my language black lip and

red carnation/ Safe house safe.” Despite its provocative title, the band’s “Burned by the Christians” is more beautiful than brutal, grafting surreal images of “wire in the teeth while we warm twine” onto rippling streams of acoustic guitar and slightly distorted violin.

While its work is not overtly Christian, Black Rebel Motorcycle Club’s latest album has a spiritual subtext. This could be attributed to the influence of former Call member Michael Been—a coproducer and the father of lead singer Robert Levon Been. In the 1980s, the Call exerted profound influence on a nascent U2, and the Call’s same level of craft saturates this muscular effort. The opening track, “Took Out a Loan,” could pass for a Rolling Stones outtake, while “666 Conductor” jangles and swaggers like a crossroads cautionary tale of fallenness: “She’s got everyone to help her on her way . . . down.”

Little has changed with the songs and vocal stylings of Karen Peris since the 1980s, and there’s a certain timelessness to her style. This 11-song effort surges and slips like the ocean waves. Some of the tracks, such as “Happy Birthday,” a gentle, acoustic celebration, are sensitive without going sappy, reflecting the personal nature of Peris’s work. So too with “Since I Still Tell You My Every Day,” an artful anthem to a longstanding, possibly absent love: “I wish you’d be at Bethany / I wish you’d come to violin with me.”

Robinson—a former all-American football star and onetime bouncer—presents his placid, operatic bass voice in a series of widely varying but highly listenable settings. The piano-framed “Walk with Me” suggests a Joe Sample jazz arrangement, with Robinson’s voice playing off of swirling guitars, sleigh bells and Hammond organ. “Go Down Moses” takes a different turn, orchestrated like a stage musical—but is hardly overblown as it glistens with bittersweetness. And in “Take My Mother Home,” Robinson simultaneously sounds as if he’s singing comfort at the bedside of an ailing family member and boldly praising the Lord.