

# KELLEY STOLTZ CIRCULAR SOUNDS



**C**ircular Sounds is the fourth LP from San Francisco's home recording auteur Kelley Stoltz. Its 13 songs are a stereophonic advance on the lo-fidelity psych-fuzz of *Antique Glow* (Beautiful Happiness, 2004) and the mid-fi piano-rock of *Below the Branches* (Sub Pop, 2006): two modest masterpieces which, by a curious coincidence, both made #24 in *MOJO* magazine's "Best Albums" list for their respective years.

Kelley has also been praised by such esteemed publications as *Uncut*, *Rolling Stone*, *Q*, *The New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Time Out London*, *The Independent*, and *Ptolemaic Terrascope*. In Australia he is a bona fide cult sensation, having scored a radio hit with "Underwater's Where the Action Is" (off *Antique Glow*), while "Birdies Singing" (off *Below the Branches*) established him in Sweden after it was used to soundtrack a TV commercial for Volvo.

*Circular Sounds* is very much a pop record, in the classic '60s mold. Just listen to first single "Your Reverie": a glorious, garage-psych rocker that winks a dilated eye at XTC's faux-retro alter ego The Dukes of Stratosphear. The untrained ear would be hard pushed to tell that this was not the work of a band. However, as before, Kelley recorded the basic tracks at home alone, with minimal overdubs added later in a studio by good friends Shayde Sartin (Skygreen Leopards, Wooden Wand) and Kevin Ink (The Residents, Frank Black). "Below the Branches was my piano man record," says Kelley. "This one has more straightforward guitar jams. I didn't know how to play piano until a few years ago. That's why it was all the same: plonk-plonk-plonk-plonk... the mental patient piano style!"

He's refined his piano playing for *Circular Sounds*' opening number "Everything Begins": a horn-and-harmony-soaked romance that suggests Love covering "Good Day Sunshine." "Tintinnabulation" is a gorgeous, lysergic shimmy named after "the harmonic overtone that bells make when they ring together. I have these new age environment LPs from the '70s. There's one called *Tintinnabulation* that's just monkish bells. I thought it was the coolest word! That was going to be the album title but no one can pronounce it."

The deceptively jaunty "Birmingham Eccentric" is a tribute to one of the characters Kelley knew in his home town of Birmingham, MI: an upper-class suburb of Detroit marked by chain stores and anonymity. "Birmingham Eccentric" is actually the name of the local paper. But one day I was back visiting a dear friend of mine, who still lives there with his parents. I just think he's funny and cool, but to some people he's a very eccentric guy. So I thought that guy's the real Birmingham Eccentric - the living embodiment of eccentricity in a suburban, white conservative town."

Featuring delicate percussion, acoustic guitar and an incisive turn of phrase ("Stronger than Perspex, clear as a window pane"), "Gardenia" shows off Kelley's ability to divine the beauty from any situation. It was inspired by a tedious former job at a video store, whose owner would keep the titular blooms on the counter. "It was going to be about learning to hate these flowers by the hour, but who wants to hear that? So I turned it into a love song for a girl. Just what the world needs!"

The album's mid-section boasts an accomplished troika worthy of The Kinks' imperial phase, from the rock 'n' roll twang of "To Speak to the Girl," to the drowsy, autumnal vibe of "Put My Troubles to Sleep," and the nifty bass vibrations of "When You Forget." These tracks boost Kelley's fullest production to date: radio-ready yet retaining the organic warmth that gave his earlier work its character. He is no longer a marginal, 'lo-fi' artist: "I work in a second-hand record store and that's made me more of a hi-fi advocate. It's hard for me to listen to stuff that was recorded on a cassette player nowadays. I've started to appreciate good sound. By the last record I was mid-fi. I think I'm mid-fi now!"

— Manish Agarwal, *London*, October 2007

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