

STARS SET YOURSELF ON FIRE

Available in Canada October 12, 2004 on Arts&Crafts International

*“When there’s nothing left to burn,
you have to set yourself on fire.”*

Montreal in winter is a cold, cruel place. It’s the sort of city where you have to chip the tears off your cheeks when you start to cry, where words freeze barely halfway out of your mouth. The cold is a vindictive bride – she’ll trap you between her thighs and turn your heart to ice if you’re not careful. Most sensible people spend their time indoors, trying to combat the chill by drinking red wine, getting high and having sex. Some fall in and out of love and some just fall asleep.

Last January, in the dead of night when everyone was dreaming, Montreal’s Stars escaped the city for an even colder place. Bundled in parkas, they headed to North Hatley, in Quebec’s rural Eastern Townships, hunkered down and set themselves on fire.

When the snow melted and they came out blinking in the sun, Stars discovered they’d made something of staggering beauty.

By all accounts, the process of creating Set Yourself On Fire, Stars’ third full-length album – for Arts & Crafts, home to their dear friends and sometime collaborators and bandmates Broken Social Scene – played like scenes from *The Shining*. During one of the coldest winters on record, the soft revolutionaries set up shop in a cabin offered to them by an odd man they’d met in a local pub, a chap named Alan Nicholls. Turned out he used to play in a classic Montreal garage band in the sixties and currently writes tunes for Robert Altman. Over the mixing board in his country home studio, there was a photo of Alan giving John Lennon a hug. While the snow fell outside, Stars nestled in their cocoon, drank rivers of booze, smoked things they shouldn’t, had bloody arguments, slid down icy hills on the bellies of their snowsuits, kissed and made up and nearly went insane. They steeped themselves in Sam Cooke and the Super Furry Animals, hash cakes and champagne, DuMaurier Lights and library books, the Apostle of Hustle and skating. Serious emo shit went down. When they were done letting themselves completely fall apart, Stars channeled all that cabin feverish intensity into writing brilliant songs. James Shaw, their old pal from Metric, showed up to help record some tracks. They think he survived unscathed.

Our valiant heroes finally returned to Montreal when the world woke up. In May, they invited a fantastic British engineer named Tom McFall to visit, and finished the record, fuelled by vegan food from up the street. Tony Hoffer, a fine fellow whose production skills have helped folks like Beck, Grandaddy, Air and Phoenix make blissful pop albums, lent a hand mixing the record.

Stars started from the roots up with Set Yourself On Fire, pushing and tormenting each other to make their most ambitious and collaborative album yet – this time, Torquil, Amy, Chris and Evan brought drummer Pat McGee along for the ride. Although Pat’s provided the band’s live heart-beat for the past two years, this is the first recording he’s made with Stars. Sources say he made ice cream and brought utter hilarity to the fold, and all were thankful.

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The result? A massive leap forward for the band. Let's say Stars' first album, *Nightsongs*, was the result of two Toronto boys marooned in Brooklyn feeling small and alone, and recruiting a rotating cast of friends to help them whisper a lovely message of beautiful, hopeful things. *Heart*, their second LP (which was nominated for a Juno, the top honour for musicians in Canada's frozen hinterland), was a full band falling in love together and settling into a euphoric hibernation under grey woolly covers.

Set Yourself On Fire is the sound of what happens after the thaw. It's thinking your life is on track, and when the floorboards collapse under your feet, giving in to the chaos instead of fighting it, starting over again more brilliant and gorgeous and raw than you've ever been before. It's knowing you have to decimate your own history in order to understand it. They claim they were aiming for a straight-up sex record, but ended up writing a sex and death and robots record – in Stars, everything that starts off simple blows up big, ornate and rich.

It's there from track one, *Your Ex-Lover Is Dead*, where an exquisitely warm brass section helps tell a call-and-response story of half-regret, of seeing someone you once fucked at a party, knowing they never hurt you the way they could've, and feeling awkward, hateful and oddly wistful about it. It's there in Evan's driving bassline and the swirls of Amy's breathy vocals on the sweetly hooky first single, *Ageless Beauty*. It's there in the sultry melodies and taut rhythm section of the he-said, she-said slow-burn jazz creeper *The Good Fight*, ripping holes through that thin line between love and hate. It's there in the simple, soaring perfection of the string-drenched war & peace ballad *Celebration Guns*, the pure love song (and self-styled Outkast ripoff) *The First Five Times* and the big shiny Smile-y harmonies of *Soft Revolution*. If *Nightsongs* was the head and *Heart* was, uh, the heart, then Stars' third album is totally balls out – it's the nervous system, the base of your spine, your entire sensory mechanism on hyperdrive.

Sure, they all still love the Smiths, New Order, Momus, Broken Social Scene and pretty pop songs, but they've made a record that transcends any of those influences. They want you to live every day harder than you've ever lived it before. They want you to remember those fifteen seconds in your life when you kissed someone and it broke your heart. They want to keep you hopelessly in love with them and give you the motivation to fight while the world spirals to its endgame.

With *Set Yourself On Fire*, they've left you with the rallying cry of the soft revolution.

STARS ARE:

Torquil Campbell – vocals, keyboard & trumpet

Evan Cranley – bass, guitar & trombone

Amy Millan – guitar & vocals

Chris Seligman – keyboards, programming & French horn

Pat McGee – drums