



## Nikki's Room CD REVIEW

Not all albums bloom in a day and wilt in a few weeks. It's been more than 18 months since local songwriter Mark Adkins and his band mates released Nikki's Room, but college and community radio stations just keep playing it. Maybe that's because the album's two knockout singles, "Judi" (a tribute to the late Earth First! leader Judi Bari) and "Fields of War," have endured as musical elixir for anxiety about global warming and Iraq. "Judi" not only provides catharsis but inspires with a story of individual resistance to environmental decay ("Judi Bari gather your seeds, planting rainbows in the wild country").

Nikki's Room has psychedelic, folk and tribal influences throughout. The extended shelf life of this recording speaks to the fact that it's one of the most substantive albums to originate from Madison in a long time.

*Rich Albertoni, Isthmus magazine 2006*

## subvocal performance REVIEW

...Madison's Subvocal plays moody, layered music that should appeal to fans of Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois. The group's performance with Tracy Jane Comer was one of the highlights of the 2006 Madison Area Music Awards show....

*John Wiedenhoft, Wisconsin State Journal 2006*

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... *subvocal* is one of the few Wisconsin outfits to embrace eclecticism without sacrificing musical beauty, lyrical relevance or commercial potential. Nikki's Room quietly pulsates with mesmerizing ambiance and haunting (sometimes spoken) vocals that linger in an ethereal and dark otherworld, where time and place no longer seem to matter. *subvocal* makes nods to both modern noise and classic melodies. Vocalist, guitarist and band mastermind Mark Adkins sounds like Peter Gabriel and is often joined by the angelic voice of Vanessa Tortolano, with occasional backing by cello, bass, keyboards, vibes and percussion. Nikki's Room is alternately sparse, stark and stunning.

*Michael Popke The Shepherd-express Dec 2005*

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DNA Studio's Brian Daly and Mark Adkins have turned out a gorgeously haunting recording, one of which Roger Waters and Peter Gabriel would be equally proud. Something tells me however that deeper and darker forces were at work in order to bring forth what can only be described in musical terms as "song painting," or more concisely, art. Joining Adkins and Tortolano are cellist Steve Pingry and drummer Gregory Thornburg. Making additional contributions are guitarist Brad Graham, bassists Randy Salber and Brian Daly, and vibraphonist Geoff Brady. Jake "Dr. DeKreep" is also present to lend macabre voice-overs to the cryptic "*Fist Stick Knife Gun*" and the very Floydish "*3rd Person*." But it is Adkins who conjures up these demons, writing all the music and lyrics and supplying the structural framework which the other musicians expertly adorn. Acoustic guitar, piano, harmonica and samples are all performed by Adkins but it's his production and engineering expertise and his vocals that breathe life into these pieces, transforming each track into a living being. Enticing vocal performances abound but "*Judi*" has to be Adkins' finest moment to date. Here he demonstrates the full range and power of his voice, which is substantial. In fact, throughout the disc, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish his mournful backing vocals from Tortolano's. On "*3rd Person*" Adkins sustains a climactic vocal note for a full forty-five seconds. On "*Rain Version 2*" he perfectly balances tension and release, the calm understatement of the vocal melody mimicking voices from the beyond. Tortolano takes the lead on the album's most beautiful song, "*Ghost*," cementing her importance as a major contributor to *subvocal*'s sound. This is a tune that will reverberate in your mind for a long time to come. Pingry's contributions are also substantial and it would be difficult to imagine *subvocal* without him. "*Ghost*" is where he also shines most brightly, a double-tracked cello solo gracing the midsection. You can hear him throughout the recording, peeking around the corner with a heavily delayed accentuation, hovering above the songs with an alluring detachment, or grabbing attention momentarily with a wild burst of bowed madness. Graham throws in some delicate and spacey guitar work. He gets his chance to come to the fore in "*Fields of War*," in which the slide-guitar fills and flighty soloing recall the best, most intense work of David Gilmour. Other standout cuts include "*Possession*," an excellent composition in the Peter Gabriel mode featuring some effective and worldly percussion from Thornburg, and "*Raising Sails*," which boasts some of the most exquisite acoustic guitar tone ever committed to disc. There is little fluff in the lyrical content and "heavy" only begins to describe the psychological leanings of the music's subject matter. From hopeless loss of both life and love, to the mythology of the better aspects of human behavior, to war, this album is full of searching, pain, despair and suffering. One cannot know the depths of darkness, however, without also knowing the light that pierces it and Nikki's Room is enchantingly uplifting. Mild disassociation, headphones and candlelight strongly encouraged.

*Rick Tvedt editor: Rick's Cafe, Wisconsin's Regional Music News Jan, 2005*