

Welcome to Balthrop Alabama

Your Big Plans, Our Little Town

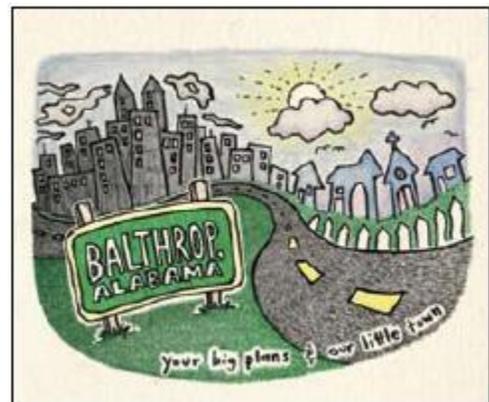
by Kevin Nutt
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When I was living in New York City back in the early 1990s, my periodic homesickness manifested itself in strange ways. I was often startled to see a fellow Alabamian I had not seen in years standing on a street corner, appearing suddenly behind a checkout counter or wandering into my classroom at Hunter College only to realize in the next instant the certain person was not who I thought it was. My head was continually filled with fleeting memories and images of Alabama. Eventually I had to return and moved out of New York City.

The musical collective Balthrop, Alabama has solved this problem by creating their own Alabama town of the mind in Brooklyn, New York and peopled it with like-minded townsfolk musicians. Brother and sister Pascal and Lauren Balthrop, originally from Mobile, have produced a winning and instantly likable collection of songs on their debut release *Your Big Plans & Our Little Town*. It's almost as if the players in a superb and quirky production of *Winesburg, Ohio* or Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* eschewed speaking lines and instead passed around a guitar and took turns singing songs from the heart.

And like a raucous ad hoc town meeting where everyone brings an instrument to play, the record is filled with the sounds of banjos, various woodwind and brass instruments, accordions and even a rinky-dink drum machine. Balthrop, Alabama elsewhere has been compared to bands like Neutral Milk Hotel or the Moldy Peaches. But I hear the eels, Sufjan Stevens and the Danielson Family.

The slightly raw (which is good) acoustic guitar driven songs on *Your Big Plans & Our Little Town* roam from the wistfully weird to the bright eyed matter of factness of "Explode." Even the more somber songs like "Georgiana Starlington" and "Down on Us" are never overwhelmed by pessimism. There is a thread of some kind of quiet enduring hope running through these songs and it bursts to the surface in the record's best song. Sung by Lauren Balthrop, "Explode" leaves you with the feeling that Balthrop's response to the world's destruction is just, "Well, c'mon. Let's pick it up and keep goin'." And, obviously, they might as well have a good time on their journey. There's an absolutely charming video of "Explode" on YouTube that you must see featuring all the Balthrop denizens. Filmed in a herky-jerky stop time, the Balthrop congregation wander in and out of the frame, dance wildly and chant to the football-like final chorus. Balthrop possesses an astonishing sense of instantly likable unprepossessingness, and a rare lack of apparent self consciousness that always seems to signal a new musical trend or direction, and it is evident in this video performance.



There are background ambient sounds running beneath many of the songs on the record and whether intended or not the quiet sea shore sounds of the final tune, "Song for a Little

Girl I Saw at the Beach”, segues perfectly with the opening track’s bird chirps, creating a kind of hermetic circular seal to the whole production.

What I think Balthrop, Alabama is trying to do is to figure out a way to create unsentimental optimistic art in a milieu that often values the existential and the pessimistic. If they succeed, Your Big Plans & Our Little Town will be just a beginning; an understatement to what lies artistically ahead for them.

I keep going back to the YouTube video of “Explode” and now that I think about it, some of the folk in the video are beginning to look strangely familiar, like some of my old classmates or long lost Alabama friends. It is almost like being homesick. Maybe after a few listens to Your Big Plans & Our Little Town the good people of Balthrop, Alabama might start looking a little familiar to you.