

Buttless Chaps
Where Night Holds Light
Mint Records



With *Where Night Holds Light*, the Buttless Chaps continue their musical evolution from offbeat alt-country to more expansive, yet still offbeat, orchestral pop. Their music projects an open, pastoral quality that is forged by both acoustic and electric instrumentation. One of the band's intriguing aspects is how twangy and rock elements coexist with all of the synthesized whirls and blips. Nothing the Chaps do is straightforward. Their songs are stuffed with a variety of musical ideas, time signatures, and melodies. The one constant component, however, comes in the singing. Dave Gowans possesses a resonant, dramatic voice that is akin to the *Tindersticks'* Stuart Staples, while Ida Nilsen's lithe harmonizing serves an appealing counterpoint to Gowans' resonant singing. Songs like "Caboose," "The Poacher," and "Master and Commander" showcase what this western Canadian ensemble does best: create entrancing aural pieces that radiate an alluring, twilight tranquility. They also shine on a couple tunes with a rockier edge, the title cut and "Migratory Birds," both of which use the arty new wave groups like *Simple Minds* and *Echo & the Bunnymen* as their jumping-off point. Even when the songs turn more meandering, the efforts have interesting moments. In the overly long "Movements," a cascading piano part captures one's attention, as does a banjo solo. The penchant for elaborate arrangements and elliptical lyrics does make it somewhat hard to warm up to the band. Lyrics touch upon the natural world (insects, birds, river, snow, soil, etc.), but an otherworldly inscrutability exists in them. As a result, the songs often wind up being fascinating, although not totally captivating. Even their most emotionally direct number, the simply done set closer "Occupation of Freedom," feels slightly remote. Full of beauty, the music on *Where Night Holds Light* holds an unsettling undercurrent that seems part of the band's design. A beguiling, if not quite totally successful, musical adventure.

Michael Berick
All Music Guide

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*** - Three Stars

The press-sheet blurb says Vancouver's Buttless Chaps have fashioned an album of morose beauty, but with a nudge and a wink and a say no more" Interesting. Dave Gowans' brooding baritone has the tone of a wistful robot, hovering over lazy banjos and occasional soupy synthesizers, with lyrical themes running to the bleak, there's your morose beauty. Here's hoping the winks acknowledge only the irony or pairing alt-hillbilly and new wave, and not the band's unfortunate name. Whichever, there's good stuff here" Caboose imagines 54-40 lost in the alt-country backwoods; the title track is grand, hopeful and orchestral, in that current Canadian indie-label way. And *Occupations Of Freedom*, about regret and those on the lone, is something Johnny Cash might have liked. Say no more. - B.W.

The Globe and Mail
Toronto, ON

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At this point the Vancouver quintet (*Radiogram/* Great Aunt Ida multi-instrumentalist/singer Ida Nilsen joined a few months back) have completely subsumed the disparate new wave/electro and country influences that sometimes caused jarring instrumental pile-ups on past recordings. That takes some of the gleeful anarchy out of the sound (something I always liked) but it also forces you to consider the songs rather than the schtick, and the songs are damn good. "Cornered and Jaded" (with clanging guest guitar from Rheostatic Martin Tielli) sounds like Bowie's "Heroes" filtered through Bill Callahan; "Movements" somehow catches a bit of Veda Hille's whimsy on rolling piano chords and Dave Gowans' stentorian baritone. It's almost scary how good these guys are getting-catch them at The Black Dog on Wednesday, March 8th with David P Smith.

See Magazine
Edmonton

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EMMA SASSE

Layered with banjo, piano, horns, jangly guitars, accordion, auto-harp, and rolling vocals, this is a splendid, velvety addition to the Buttless Chaps' expanding oeuvre.



Since 1998, the Victoria-based Chaps have put out a self-described electro-country album every year, but *Where Night Holds Light* defies both monikers, landing more in the tradition of Calexico or Iron & Wine, without avoiding any twinge of twang.

The Chaps aren't afraid to let songs run their course. Four songs exceed five minutes, and the circular return to the chorus, seamless changes, and lead singer Dave Gowans' sorta-monotone carries one song into another with ease. Previous criticisms of Gowans' vocals as too melodramatic—too Tea Party—are blunted on this year's Chaps album.

The time to avail oneself of the *Where Night Holds Light* is at or around hour two of a road trip. The novelty's worn off. The excitement of ditching the city bleeds into an introspective deference to the passage of time. This album fills that gap in space and time. Buy it and get out of town.

Vue Weekly
Edmonton, AB

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There's a forest on the cover of The Buttless Chaps' new album *Where Night Holds Light*; flip it over and you see a road, lined with electric wires. A few times their songs explicitly address that balance between city life and the natural world. Like on "Migratory Birds": "There's a vastness in the plains / that reflects off the wings of planes." Somehow their music itself reflects this same divide. It's sophisticated pop music, with trumpets darting here and there, and at the same has a backwoods country-music-ness to it. Call it countrypolitan, if you'd like. It's nuanced, delicate pop music, with textures and sweet melodies, and it also makes you feel that you're off in the woods somewhere, offering both the sense of mystery and the serenity which that implies. Dave Gowans takes the lead vocals, with his Nick Cave/Leonard Cohen-ish baritone, and Ida Nilsert sings pretty harmonies in a complementary way: another balance of moods. Much more developed and satisfying than The Buttless Chaps' previous album *Love This Time*, *Where Night Holds Light* has a romantic, charming quality on the surface, while deeper questions, ideas, and juxtapositions live underneath.

David Heaton
Erasing Clouds

Buttless Chaps
Where Night Holds Light
Mint Records

One gentle Vancouver roots-pop band
Has its jangle and twang well in hand
But the old-time sonics
Have lush electronics
That nudge them into more modern land

Winnipeg Sun

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Capturing the energy, excitement, and chemistry of a band in the recording studio is a difficult task and one that The Buttless Chaps have wrestled with in the past. And this is not to slight earlier work. Both *Love This Time* and *Death Scenes* are strong efforts with numerous high points and maybe part of this equation is that the band is so compelling live. Their current release, *Where Night Holds Light* on Mint Records crosses that hurdle with ease. We hear a band sounding mature, relaxed and in their element. There is a clarity of vision on this record, the production is superb, and while previous efforts have sometimes sounded busy, the mix on this recording has a spaciousness and a sonic hierarchy that makes absolute sense. Each element has its place and without competing is clearly heard, something that is vital to a band that layers so many subtle textures in their music. Most importantly, they meld their diverse and seemingly disparate influences - contemporary folk/country, synth pop, prog rock, ambient stoner - into a seamless and coherent body of music that from the opening bars of *Caboose* (a road song if I ever heard one) draws the listener in and takes them on a journey to where the night holds light.

One could almost divide earlier Chaps' music into synth songs and acoustic songs - with perhaps synth songs with banjo as a third category. This album can not be so conveniently dissected. It may appear on the surface to be leaning more to the country side of the band's personality, but don't be fooled. Hypnotic synthesizer lines are woven throughout and on the heavier, more rocking *Where Night Holds Light*, keyboardist Morgan McDonald lets loose with a dizzying synth break that will have you running for a fresh adult diaper. The addition of Ida Nilson - Vancouver's favourite, multi-talented, musical workaholic - as a permanent member is huge. Her vocal harmonies add a sweet, rich and lonesome texture to Gowans' mellow baritone, while her contributions on the accordion and autoharp add to the complexity of The Chaps' soundscape. Cameos from Rheostatics Martin Tielli and Tim Veseley add guitars, bass, and more luxurious vocal harmonies, and inventive trumpeter J.P. Carter again joins the band for three tracks. The brassy bravado and machismo of his mariachi-like hook dramatically announces *Blanket of Pain* and later in the song an achingly brief flight into free blowing leaves you begging for more. The journey fittingly ends with a bare acoustic re-working of *Occupations of Freedom* which originally appeared on the band's sophomore effort *Tumblewire*.

There is a lyrical longing and melancholy afoot in *Where Night Holds Light*, something you can't quite place your finger on, a sense of regret. Musically, it is an interwoven mosaic of sonic textures and skillful, artful dynamics and arrangements. This is a compelling, confident release from a band that has delighted audiences for years with their honest, fearless, and inventive approach to music.

Murray Wilson
Brand X Media

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"We've finally figured out what we sound like," Buttless Chaps frontman Dave Gowans proudly declares. "It only took us eight years."

And seven albums, that weaved through rootsy folk and alt.country influences to eventually forge a sound that, on songs like the poppy *Migratory Birds* from the Vancouver-based band's recently released *Where Night Holds Light*, recall such heretofore-unrecognized country-rock pioneers as Joy Division. Of course, throughout the proceedings, and even when the synths threaten to take over, Gowans still keeps his trusty banjo at the ready.

'A natural change'

"It doesn't really apply anymore," Gowans says of the alt.country label. "When the band started out, I was writing folk and country songs, but it began moving beyond that as early as the second album. It's been a natural change."

A change abetted by longtime associate and fellow banjoist Ida Nilson, whose own band *Great Aunt Ida* has demonstrated a knack for crafting fine melodies. Nilson has long been an unofficial fifth Chap; for *Where Night Holds Light* the band made it official.

"Ida's always guested at shows and on the records," Gowans says. "We realized it would be really good if she could come in full time and join us on tour. Some of the older songs feel almost static after you've played them a lot, but she'll play accordion or add harmony and make them new. It's been really cool."

It'll be cooler still to see the new, rockin' Buttless Chaps in the company of Rhume and Rheostatic Tim Veseley's fine *Violet Archers*. It may not be getting back to the country, but you'll like it.

Ottawa Sun

MUSIC _ FFWO CALGARY

by JANE McCULLOUGH

Migratory Chaps

Musicians make the most of the touring lifestyle and discover the perks of the road

>>PREVIEW

THE BUTTLESS CHAPS

Thursday, March 2

Palomino

Being vegetarian is not always the easiest thing when you're a touring band, and while not a strict herbivore, Dave Gowans of The Buttless Chaps prefers the veggie lifestyle.

"You know, there's only so many grilled cheese sandwiches a person can eat before they start failing," he says.

While I associate road trips with all sorts of fast-food goodies, I expect that a constant lack of quality and a surplus of salt gets old fast for any group making their way across the country. Include the time factor, and that list of both the safe and sketchy places to eat becomes even more important.

"We had this idea for a long time of making a placemat that would have a map of Canada and, in each city, there would be a corresponding chart indicating which places to visit," he says. "We were going to have it downloadable off our website so that bands could just print it out. 'The Buttless Placemat' - it is still in the works."

While The Buttless Chap's haven't been further east than Montreal in the last few years, they see a fair amount of Canada during their touring schedule. While they may not be in each city long enough to notice the shifting details of a city's geography, patterns of expansion present themselves.

"The one thing I've noticed is the continual development that happens along the highway and the way the smaller towns seem to get bigger and

the infringing of big-box businesses everywhere. That's a depressing thing to see."

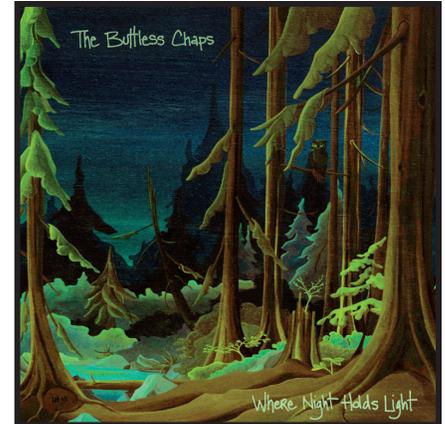
Yet another reason that the placemat idea sounds so cool - not only are they sharing their experiences, but also encouraging support of independent businesses. That type of support is natural for an indie band that relies on the buttress of friends and fans of the music, particularly while on tour.

In addition to having fun visiting folks in each city, the opportunity of collaboration often presents itself. The Chaps enjoy inviting their tourmates to share the stage and kick out the jams - which is exactly what happened during their tour with the Rheostatics. It worked so well that Tim Vesely and Martin Tielli both contributed to The Buttless Chaps's latest release, *Where Night Holds Light*.

"It's just really nice to hear what other people can add to your music, especially in a recorded environment when there's the chance to elaborate on songs and see what they can do," he says. "I think it's always a natural progression. It's fun when it happens. It's never really a forced thing."

Where Night Holds Light is a beautiful effort that has a soft intensity and continually evolves as you discover all 10 flourishing songs. The vocal harmonies are striking and the guitar tones seem to melt with the percussion among the pop, country and folk sounds that are always nearby.

"We really wanted to capture the feel of the band, our live energy on the



record, and also try to make the songs have a little more space in them and breathe a little more.

"Once I get into the studio, I really think about what that whole album is going to sound like. When you start listening to all of the playbacks, it starts making sense of what songs will fit and what ones won't."

Gowans, who enjoys more of a whole-album concept as opposed to just releasing a group of songs that might not be connected in style or flow, says the band had more songs to choose from and that each member is pleased with the result - just as their followers will be.

And in coming to Calgary the Chaps look forward to playing these songs for their fans, touching base with friends, eating at The Coup and doing a bit of shopping. Gowans, whose day job is at a record store in Vancouver, has a spot in mind.

"It'd be nice to go to Recordland. I have a little bit of a list."

JUST SITTING ON THEIR BUTTS

It's taken nearly a decade, but popular music has finally caught up with The Buttless Chaps, if only to provide them with a genre that fits. The band first rode into the Victoria, British Columbia music scene in 1998 and, because of indie rock nuances and fuzzy electronics, they got prematurely labeled alt-country; a moniker that never really suited the band. Eventually, a very old term, "southern gothic", began to get thrown around to describe their vintage tones. It's a term that sits just fine with singer/guitarist/banjo-ist Dave Gowans. "I don't really know if we're part of the southern gothic thing that's been going on because we've never consciously tried to fit into a particular sound," says Gowans. "The other bands that get called southern gothic, like Jolie Holland and Cuff The Duke, are great and we really like their records. We got lumped in with alt-country in the late '90s when we were a little more folky. Not that that's a bad thing, but that didn't really suit. The gothic stuff, I really like that sort of imagery, so I guess I don't mind if we're in with that. Those elements and themes are there, I imagine, so if there has to be a label slapped on our music, I'm happy with that one." Gowans, guitarist/lap steel man Lasse Lutick, keyboardist Morgan McDonald, drummer Torben Wilson and multi-instrumentalist Ida Nilson were already on the road in support of their new album, *Where Night Holds Light* when View speaks to them. Although the band's previous records employed a much heavier concentration of keyboards, adding floating atmospheric and an otherworldly quality to the music, *Where Night Holds Light* stabs in a different, almost David Lynch-inspired, direction. "Those elements are still there, but the electronics are more textural," explains Gowans. "I think a lot of that has to do with the way we write songs and what was going on around us at the time. Mostly for this record, somebody would have a

skeletal song or I'd have one with words to it, and then the four of us would flush ideas out of it. We've always been very collaborative and we have a right of veto-if something's brutal and not working, we chuck it.

"(The sessions were) a little different this time around. We took a bit of time. We did tracking in one studio and vocals and overdubs and mixing in another and there were breaks in between, so it gave us a chance to play some of the material. It was nice to have a break and listen to material and decide where it was going, rather than doing it all in one clump and getting sick of listening to the same songs over and over. I think we had a little more perspective this time."

Although Gowans is happy with the sound of the new album, nothing is ever a given, so the band may change horses again. Gowans says the more electronic tracks that were left off the new record will have new life on a forthcoming EP that the band hopes to make available at their shows this summer. "I don't know if (the sound of *Where Night Holds Light*) is the direction that we'll keep going in because we never plan things like that," explains the guitarist. "We have a new member, Ida, (and) she wrote her own parts for the album, as we all do, but we haven't sat down to go through the song writing process with her from the beginning so it might change again."

After this Canadian tour, The Buttless Chaps are scheduled to do a tour along the US west coast. While Gowans admits he's excited about heading south of the border, he has very modest expectations for the tour and confided that he's happy to be on the mid-card shows. "We've been treated well there so far," says Gowans hesitantly. "Obviously, the further we get from Vancouver the weaker it gets but I think that the



people that have come out have been good. The four people that have been at the show have been friendly.

"I think it'll be interesting to see how the record does when it hits the States, but I don't think we're ready to do a headlining tour. I don't know if it'd be realistic. Mint is talking about sending us to Europe later this year and I think that'd be great. I thoroughly intend on staying there for as long as possible if they send us."

Pulse Niagara

Northern Exposure

By Mike Usinger

Publish Date: 16-Feb-2006

The royal court of the Kingdom of Pantaloon is always dreaming up new and more efficient ways to screw the peasants and plebeians out of their hard-earned kopeks, shekels, and zloty.

Fittingly, Dave Gowans is hunkered down in Northern B.C. when the Georgia Straight tracks him down to talk about the new Buttless Chaps album, *Where Night Holds Light*. The singer-guitarist is calling from the iced-over shores of Burns Lake, a location that played a major role in the creation of the record, the band's fifth full-length.

"We did almost all the writing up here," Gowans says long-distance from up north, where the band is shooting a video for the album's title track. "The house that I'm in right now belongs to our guitar player [Lasse Lutick], and he built a studio in his garage. Because we never have time to get away from work and practice and distractions in Vancouver, we come up here and the bulk of the songs get finalized. Six or seven of the songs on the album were written here, and the last few were finished off here. We're surrounded by a lake that's usually frozen, and that sort of imagery gets into the lyrics and the music."

That's Gowans's way of saying that *Where Night Holds Light* is the kind of album best filed under melancholy, making it perfect for contemplating crisp winter days and frigid star-swept nights. If there's a sweeping sadness to much of the disc, the singer thinks he might know why. As anyone who's ever spent time outside of the city knows, coming back to a world of traffic jams and suburban sprawl isn't easy.

"It's almost like a depression sets in," Gowans offers. "On our last record [*Death Scenes I II III*] and this one, I think you hear that clash between the rural and urban lifestyles that we have. That comes from band members dividing their time between Northern B.C. and Vancouver and working out in the woods. We've all done bush work—tree-planting and things like that—where we come down to the city right after a season ends and then go on tour. That's reflected in the music."

in + out

Dave Gowans sounds off on the things that enquiring minds want to know.

On *Where Night Holds Light*'s big themes: "A lot of the songs are about alienation, and they tend to use imagery that might be

a bit bleak and barren. It's all about survival and coming back from a bad patch."

On the current mindset of the Buttless Chaps: "With a lot of the shows we've done recently, we've put a bit less of the dance-y and synthesizer stuff in them. It just seems to be more where our heads are at as a band. It's also hard to capture those songs on record in a way where it doesn't seem like you're making fun of something."

On his favourite lyricists: "I like David Berman of the Silver Jews. And Rennie Sparks of the Handsome Family is a big influence on me in terms of creating imagery. She's very good at painting pictures with her lyrics—her songs are almost like films."

On learning to let go: "On past records, we've been perfectionists who've worried about every little hiccup in the songs. This time we were more after the right feel than the right notes."

All this makes the Buttless Chaps sound like their favourite colour is coal-mine black. But as has been made abundantly clear over an eight-year run that started in Victoria, Paxil-coated country isn't the only musical touchstone for the band, which includes keyboardist Morgan McDonald, drummer Torben Wilson, and new enlistee Ida Nilsen on vocals and accordion. In a combination that, in theory, should go together about as well as Toby Keith and Anti-Flag, the group's past records have been as indebted to vintage new wave as they have been to pine-scented Americana. The Chaps don't completely abandon that approach on *Where Night Holds Light*. If you've ever wondered what pop radio sounded like just before Ronald Reagan took office, check out the spectral "Migratory Birds". Still, even though there's nothing more fashionable in 2006 than sounding like the summer of 1979, the Buttless Chaps made a conscious effort to downplay their skinny-tie obsessions this time out.

"We recorded about 14 or 15 songs, and then decided to go with 10," Gowans says. "We had some more electronic-style songs,

but we left them off to try and keep the album more sort of cohesive all the way through. I was thinking about this the other day—we used to write songs where we would be excited about what they sounded like, whether they were new wave or techno. This time we were more focused on things like parts and melodies." That group effort paid off with a collection of songs that place the Buttless Chaps somewhere between the Tindersticks and the Handsome Family. From the majestically downbeat folk of "The Poacher" to the shimmering drugged country of "Movements", the album's most winning moments are often its most winsome. Nilsen proves an invaluable addition on *Where Night Holds Light*'s jaw dropper, the soft-canyon duet "Insects", and both Gowans and Lutick do a fine job untethering their inner Crazy Horses on "Blanket of Pain". Things wrap up with "Occupations of Freedom", a world-weary lullaby that's as breathtaking as, well, a cold winter night in Burns Lake. Gowans admits he and his Chaps have a deeply ingrained love for the region, so much so that it inspired the title *Where Night Holds Light*.

"When it gets dark around here there are no streetlights or things," he says. "You walk down logging roads and it'll be pitch black and dead silent. Then you'll see an owl in the trees when the moon comes up. The tone of the record is that within times of darkness, there's always some sort of beacon to guide you back home again." And what's the beacon that gets Gowans home through the dark times? That one's easy, and he answers as quickly as the question is fired at him. And his response shows that, for all the downbeat majesty of the Buttless Chaps, the band also knows the importance of having a sense of humour.

"Mine's usually beer," he says with a laugh. "If I know there's beer, I'm always going to make it home." -

The Buttless Chaps play a *Where Night Holds Light* release party at the Red Room next Thursday (February 23).

Georgia Straight