

# Montero: Performer

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Before Ben Montero won the Internet with his wholesome, psychedelic comics about frogs and birds, he authored a comic titled “Lee Hazlewood Kicking Jonathan Richman’s Ass,” which shows exactly that: the cosmic cowboy kicking around the Boston bard, who accepts his fate with a smile on his face as his skinny frame flops around. It’s hard to say if Montero’s just enamored with the image or if he’s trying to make a statement; the two artists don’t have enough in common for saying one’s better than the other to say much.



Richman’s the better songwriter for my money, but listening to Montero’s music, it’s easy to see why he’d root for Hazlewood. Montero is enamored with the art of arrangement, and though his new album is called *Performer*, he’s more of a pop auteur in the vein of Hazlewood, Todd Rundgren and other ubiquitous, underloved talents. Though Montero spends a lot of time with the Tame Impala crowd and heavily features that band’s Jay Watson here, his music isn’t rock but pop, made by someone who knows the difference.

There are guitars here, but they don’t drive the music. This is a holistic approach to arrangement, not Wall of Sound but cut from the same cloth. Rather than driving forward, these songs reach upward, with choruses that come across like humanistic chants and synths that spiral to the heavens (he likes a video-game sound effect not unlike the one you hear when you level up). His voice is wispy and thin, but it works in the interest of the music; he’s not a frontman but a hermetic figure crouched in the depths of the studio.

Like the characters in his cartoons, Montero comes across as an affable stoner, the kind who doesn’t flinch at a song called “Tokin’ the Night Away.” His lyrics can be disarmingly casual, but he’ll throw in something deeply psychedelic when the inspiration hits, like the “*diamonds falling down from the sky*” during a romantic encounter on “Montero Airlines.” “*Thank you for flying Montero today,*” he sighs after the aforementioned tryst, and it’s a testament to Montero’s goofy sincerity that he can get away with saying that after sex.

In order to be a great pop auteur, you need great pop songs, and, unfortunately, that’s the area where Montero falls short. A lot of these songs run longer than they should, either due to incessantly-repeated choruses or distracted flights of fancy like the cheesy vocoder coda of the title track, which is as silly as anything on the album but doesn’t add much to the song itself. There’s one two-minute pop song, “Running Race,” but it doesn’t come across as more

than an interlude when sandwiched between Montero's monoliths.

But even when *Performer* doesn't work, it'll be the first Montero album most of us hear. It's a compelling introduction to an artist never anything less than lovable. It's the first album he's made since attaining Internet ubiquity with his strips (his last album, *The Loving Gaze*, came out in 2013). He has with the rare gift of tempering skyscraping grandeur with laid-back couchlock humor, and no matter what you think of Ben Montero's music, it's hard to not want to share a joint and listen to some Beach Boys records with this guy.

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