

Superchunk: *Here's Where the Strings Come In*

By Kim Windyka

Superchunk's 1995 release *Here's Where the Strings Come In* arrived two years after what's considered by fans and critics alike as one of their defining works, *Foolish*, a raw, noisy and cathartic record inspired by the dissolution of lead singer Mac McCaughan's romantic relationship with the band's bassist Laura Ballance.

Strings lightens the mood a bit (but not *too* much), while retaining the signature emotionally-charged lyrics, passionate delivery and animated, buzzy energy that has long characterized Superchunk's sound. And its tonal shift is also, in a sense, subtly representative of the band's triumphant emergence from that turbulent interpersonal period which briefly called their future as a group into question. It's the truce after the breakup — the moment when time and some perspective begin to shape a more palatable view of the past.

The mid-90s served as a somewhat strange transition period between the dark and gloomy grunge era and the shiny, happy influx of pop stars like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera and boy bands like 'N Sync and Backstreet Boys.

But bands like Superchunk, Pavement, Archers of Loaf and Meat Puppets confidently led the indie rock charge during the sonic shift, releasing some of the most important albums of all time for the genre during a span of just three to four years.

Still, Superchunk stood out even further among its contemporaries for a few different reasons. McCaughan's distinctive, high-pitched vocals made the band immediately recognizable, and — in a male-dominated scene — female bassist Laura Ballance helped pave the way for women in indie rock. And rather than simply embracing DIY as a superficial aesthetic, the band walked the walk as well, with McCaughan and Ballance founding Merge Records in 1989, a revered label that is still going strong today and features artists like The Magnetic Fields, Spoon, Teenage Fanclub and the Mountain Goats.

Strings was the fifth full-length record for the band, who formed in 1989 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and it captures the quartet in its prime and solidly in command of its sound. It continued a period bookended by *Foolish* and 1999's *Come Pick Me Up* in which Superchunk truly hit its creative stride, and was one of the very first recording projects for Wally Gagel — a multi-platinum producer and sound engineer with countless names to his roster, including Old 97's, Eels and Best Coast.

However, despite being in the pocket, the band wasn't averse to exploring outside of their comfort zone. In fact, the combination of their tried-and-true punk sensibilities and the more refined and restrained moments tastefully incorporated throughout the album are at the core of what manages to make it feel both timeless and fresh.

While the record has grown to become a fan favorite in the decades since, it is often and unfairly overshadowed by its predecessors — and even its successors to some degree, as the band has released 11 full-length albums and 5 EPs to date following *Strings*. With such a prolific catalog, it's understandable that some works get buried in the conversation over time, but *Strings* is essential Superchunk, perfectly representative of the group's unique recipe of instrumental cohesion and chemistry and relatably emotional lyrical content.

Mirroring the peaks and valleys of a relationship, the album's pacing and mood is dynamic throughout — the driving "Hyper Enough," the first single from the record, sets a frenetic and upbeat tone. "I think I'm hyper enough as it is," McCaughan repeatedly and urgently insists in the chorus. The band allows for some room to breathe immediately afterward on the lamenting and forlorn "Silverleaf and Snowy Tears." "Stamp some feelings back into my legs," he pleads against a trudging beat, courtesy of Jon Wurster. "I guess I'll freeze to death before I'll beg."

But McCaughan is shrewd enough to ensure that the moments of rawness, vulnerability and self-pity never linger long enough to totally sour the mood or burden the listener. Things pick up speed again on the "Yeah, It's Beautiful Here Too," with self-deprecating lyrics like, "Though it's selfish and mean, at the end of the day/I'll take you back any old way" and "Last year, last night/I'm tired, let's fight."

While *Strings* isn't a concept album by any stretch, this song and others, like "Detroit Has a Skyline" and "Sunshine State," underscore a narrative throughline of romanticizing the unromantic, mundane and downright dismal — like a postcard sent from a laundromat or a souvenir purchased at a museum dedicated to tragedy — artfully delivered by McCaughan through smart metaphors, wry humor and clever turns of phrase ("I barely remember driving you home/was I driving you away?" he wonders on "Iron On"). "Animated Airplanes Over Germany," sees him resigned to the relationship's demise, but still yearning for some closure: "Pull down your mask, reach down under your feet/Call me one last time from the phone in your seat... yeah, the water here is colder than most."

"Eastern Terminal," with its steady, chugging rhythm, brings things back down to earth with some levity and practicality: "And now the sun is beginning to sink/Will I get that promised drink?/If when you speak my cheeks start to burn/Then I'm a blushing bride ready to learn."

The ninth song, “Green Flowers, Blue Fish,” was originally recorded for the movie *Johnny Mnemonic*, starring Keanu Reeves, and appears on its soundtrack. While its sound is noticeably more subdued than the typical Superchunk fare, it nonetheless fits seamlessly into the flow of the album, painting a beautiful but haunting picture of a fraught and frayed connection: “You gave me the keys, but not to your home/The porcelain locks, they just wouldn’t hold/You painted them blue, but the paint would not dry/You filled your vase full but the flowers all died.”

The very last lines of the title track, which all but invite the listener to envision them being delivered with a wink and a shrug, drive home the idea of the album as a soundtrack to a more realistic — albeit more depressing — rom-com:

*But here's where everything comes together
Either that or it falls all apart
Yeah, here's where the strings come in*

Cleverly, the title track isn’t the final one. It’s a quiet signal that the story isn’t quite finished, and that, much like in life and love, everything isn’t always tied up neatly in a bow.

Instead, “Certain Stars” closes the record with the acknowledgement that it’s often easier to hold onto the dream and the potential than face reality, even if it’s not the healthiest solution: “And if you squint, that portrait could be anyone/Just let me have my same old illusion and keep your fun.”

But therein lies the charm of *Here's Where the Strings Come In*. It’s hurt, then hope; pain, then promise; indignance, then idealism. Everything in moderation.