

The Long Winters: John Roderick's Labor of Love

By Kim Windyka

The Long Winters, the longstanding and ever-evolving musical project of singer-songwriter John Roderick, experienced an incredibly prolific and productive era from 2002–2006, which saw the release of three full-length albums and an EP.

But perhaps the most interesting part of the Long Winters story is that Roderick remained the only consistent member of the band for all four records, despite the condensed period of time in which they were released. And though each features an almost completely different configuration of musicians, all of them nonetheless stay true to Roderick's core sound, songwriting style and vision throughout the entire discography.

Like many band origin stories, The Long Winters began as a casual project between musicians who were part of other bands at the time. Or, in this case, the same band. Roderick, a fixture in the Seattle music scene and member of the Western State Hurricanes who was touring with Harvey Danger as their keyboardist, joined forces with the band's singer-songwriter, Sean Nelson, to write and record an album in 2001 after they went on indefinite hiatus,

Death Cab for Cutie's Chris Walla — largely considered the third official member of The Long Winters — owned the Hall of Justice recording studio in Seattle and worked with Roderick and Nelson to track a collection of songs that they initially weren't sure would ever see the light of day. Along with help from other musicians, including Fountains of Wayne's Brian Young and Sky Cries Mary's Joe Bass, the band's first album, *The Worst You Can Do Is Harm*, was recorded.

It arrived in February 2002 on Barsuk Records, and featured several then-unreleased songs that Roderick wrote for the Western State Hurricanes, including "Unsalted Butter," "Samaritan," "Carparts," and "Medicine Cabinet Pirate."

The record immediately establishes the Long Winters' earnest and slightly esoteric style. "Give Me a Moment" haunts and hypnotizes, with emotionally evocative and personal, yet sufficiently vague lyrics set to a slow, mesmeric beat. "Living my summers out in a hotel/Finally found a moment to set a spell/Heard things at home were going astray/Won't you give me a moment, I've been away," Roderick requests. But when forced to face the music, he balks: "I heard my name but didn't turn around/Waited on the stairs for you to take the elevator down/And down."

“Carparts” infuses some light into that darkness. An upbeat melody, soaring chorus and instrumentation that could easily fit onto *When I Pretend to Fall* pair with slightly self-deprecating lyrics that suggest the protagonist is batting out of his league, wondering what the song’s subject sees in him. “I’m leaving you all of my car parts/I didn’t have the money or I would have gotten roses,” Roderick sheepishly offers. “You put all your hope in my slim chance/I didn’t know I had.”

“Medicine Cabinet Pirate” essentially fuses the range of sounds and flavors of the album together into a gloomy garage-rock march. And the brooding, almost hymnal-esque “Mimi,” another song originally written for Roderick’s previous band, appears to describes a near-death experience, with lyrics like “But when I saw you leaving me through that front window, my life flashed before my eyes.”

However, the album closes with a rollicking, off-the-cuff untitled jam that recalls jug band songs of the 1920s and infuses a sense of playfulness and levity into the work — as if to remind listeners that, despite the somber tone of many of the tracks, they’re not taking this thing *too* seriously.

Roderick enlisted keyboardist Chris Caniglia, bassist Eric Corson and Western State Hurricanes drummer Michael Shilling to round out his live band after Barsuk expressed interest in him touring to promote the record. Nelson also joined performances for a time, singing backing vocals, and contributed them to the following release as well.

When I Pretend to Fall, released in 2003, took a definitive step toward solidifying the Long Winters’ sound and introduced a much wider variety of instrumentation than that of the debut, including mandolin, violin, trumpet, saxophone, French horn and harmonica; the band enlisted nearly 20 musicians within their circle to contribute to the dozen tracks, including The Posies’ Ken Stringfellow.

While the groovy, piano-based “Blue Diamonds” tiptoes into the record with its guard up, *When I Pretend* sounds quite a bit happier on the whole than its predecessor, largely centering on the dynamics of a romantic relationship through the lens of Roderick’s poignant, powerful lyricism.

Still, love hurts, and the sonic optimism occasionally masks heavier topics within the songs. “You called to say you’re gonna run/Well, can you wait?/Can you stand it?/Are you brave or are you scared straight?” he muses on the sunny “Scared Straight,” which is buoyed by organ and horn flourishes.

The Worst You Can Do Is Harm put the band on the map, but *When I Pretend* garnered the band its first taste of commercial attention, with the record’s “Cinnamon,” an unconventional love

song, landing on the *Wedding Crashers* soundtrack in 2005. It subsequently became both a fan favorite and go-to, offbeat pick for weddings: “Two gondolas to carry us/Grand Via was hilarious/St. Paul was there to marry us/We lied, ‘We’re already married!’”

“Stupid,” which contains the album’s title, is a mellow, straightforward ode to romantic risk-taking in an effort to prevent the one that got away.

It’s not all sentimental songs, though. Elsewhere, there’s tongue-in-cheek commentary on the Seattle social and cultural scene (“Prom Night at Hater High”), and the giddy rush of meeting and befriending a like-minded soul that has the promise to become something more (“New Girl”).

Bridging the gap between the final two full albums, the *Ultimatum* EP contains four new and unreleased songs, along with live versions of both the title track and “Bride and Bridle” from *When I Pretend to Fall*.

“The Commander Thinks Aloud,” arguably the most popular Long Winters song, is a stunning, sweeping five-plus-minute journey through a tragedy in the sky, contrasting the 2003 Space Shuttle Columbia disaster with the realization of powerlessness and resignation of the crew.

*The radio is on
And Houston knows the score
Can you feel it, we're almost home
Yay! Yay!*

The intriguing, yet frightening, prospect of a complete technological takeover looms large and eerily foreshadows our modern world on “Everything Is Talking.” “Our new set can talk and think/I’m upset it was so hard to train,” Roderick laments over electronic embellishments. “Our old set was quite a bore/We yelled at it but it didn’t hear/My new friends have messages/They reach me wherever I am.”

The band’s last release to date, *Putting the Days to Bed*, featured a slightly more polished and poppier sound than previous efforts, as well as a new drummer in Nabil Ayers. the record’s lead single, “Fire Island, AK” is a slice of restless jangle-pop that drives forward with a bluesy riff and catchy melody.

The glimpses of pure, unbridled joy on *When I Pretend to Fall* become full-fledged celebrations here on tracks like “Teaspoon,” “Sky Is Open” and the ecstatic “Rich Wife,” which lets it all fly in an anthemic, snarky singalong. “Now tell me, is your high horse/Getting a little hard to ride?” Roderick sneers. “And your little bit on the side/Gettin’ harder to find?”

“Honest” tells an age-old cautionary tale about rock star romances, which delights in a deliciously ironic way. “Her mother says honest, it's alright to be a singer/But don't you love a singer whatever you do,” Roderick relays, backed by vocals that repeat and echo the warning.

A reworked version of the previous EP's folky “Ultimatum” packs more punch and muscle, yet retains the charm and vulnerability of the original release. And true to its name, “(It's a) Departure” takes a fairly sharp left turn from the other tracks, demonstrating a more straightforward, charging feel that almost calls back to the lively energy of “Untitled” on *The Worst*.

Though the extra instrumentation is pared back slightly on this record compared to *When I Pretend*, the presence of horns, pedal steel guitar and even a glockenspiel adds a richness and depth throughout that marries the best parts of all of the previous releases while demonstrating clear growth and maturation.

Roderick has kept busy in his time since the release of the last record, cohosting multiple podcasts, including *Roderick On the Line*, *Road Work*, *Friendly Fire* and most recently, *Omnibus* with longtime friend, Jeopardy all-star Ken Jennings — a deep dive into niche historical, pop culture, and societal topics. He even ventured into politics with a run for the Seattle City Council in 2015. He remains active in music, still performing Long Winters shows on occasion — with the last appearance at the Upstream Music Festival in 2017 — and working with artists like Aimee Mann and Kathleen Edwards on their own projects.

The Long Winters' discography is not only a vehicle for Roderick's heartfelt, candid and soul-stirring songcraft — it's also a glittering showcase of how art and music can be enhanced and elevated even further through the dynamic, inimitable magic of collaboration.