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Review: Whale Fall (The Madrean, 2014)

 [January 22, 2015](#)  [Valerie Polichar](#)

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Whale Fall's first post-rock/instrumental rock release, the eponymous *Whale Fall* (2011), was thoughtful, even-paced. The trumpet, deftly wielded by J-Matt Greenberg, provided an accent, not a primary voice. The album was lovely, listenable, ranging from semi-ambient to orchestral.

From the moment the horns kick in on "The Dawn Thief," with their mariachi harmonies and mournful vibrato, it's clear that *The Madrean* is different. In a good way. The horns on this album (in addition to Greenberg, guest artist Joseph Santa Maria on sax) narrate the hero's voice in a series of acoustic movies, by turns terrified, yearning, determined, destroyed, triumphant.

Sure, you can listen to this beautiful album in the background. But *The Madrean* comprises sweeping adventures that reward close listening. The Madrean region, from which the album takes its name, is an area of similar vegetation that covers parts of the American southwest and of northwestern Mexico. Legends of both the old and new West are wrapped into the music.

Each piece on this album traverses a small story; each builds, faces challenge, and survives or falls against a



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changing and unrelenting landscape. Nods to musical predecessors are in evidence, conscious or unconscious: the ghost of “Norwegian Wood” in the intro to the intense “Tahquitz,” a ribbon of Pink Floyd winding throughout, echoes here and there of Emerson, Lake and Palmer and other prog-rock grandfathers. *The Madrean* sits comfortably alongside modern post-rock fellows such as The Red Sparowes. But the unique tales presented here, and the structuring of individual tracks, set Whale Fall apart. Tracks move from slender to dense and back to spare; dynamics and pace change; there is shape, progress, intention.

There are many highlights on this album, among them the interplay of cello and horns on “I Shall Sail No More (No More Shall I Sail),” which drops down at ~5:25 to a sprinkling of ethereal bells and an ominous percussive shuffle. Resonant percussion and elegant guitar and keyboard motifs provide a constant sense of flowing movement to “On River, On Route;” heavenly horn harmonies splash in at the 3-minute mark to enrapture. On “El Pistolero,” a hoofbeat provides the backdrop while the music swells, releases, swells to thunder again, then drops to an extended coda with soulful strings. The explosion of horns at 2:45 in “Overpass LA” blows the mind and wakens the heart.



The Madrean is exquisitely conceived and executed. Regulars Ali Vazin and Dave Pomeranz finesse plotlines on

guitar; Greenberg and Santa Maria break hearts on horn, while Greenberg on keyboards runs the gamut from retro synth to nuanced piano lines. Erik Tokle provides a vibrant undercurrent of bass, critical not only to motion but to the build on tracks like "El Pistolero," and guest artist Artyom Manukyan shines on heart-rending cello arrangements. Percussionist Aaron Farinelli is far from a one-trick pony, his skill supplying every form of transport from horseback to waterway to automobile to (did we imagine it?) railroad. These strong musicians balance each other well, with no weak links. With their sophomore effort, Whale Fall have proven themselves a major player in the post-rock field. We look forward to the new trails they will blaze.

Unappreciated Scholars Review Grade: A

The Madrean is available on [iTunes](#) and [Bandcamp](#); portions can be streamed on [their website](#) or on [SoundCloud](#). Follow Whale Fall on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/WhaleFall>. Visit the official website at <http://whalefall.com/>.

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