

About THAO

<http://www.contactmusic.com/new/home.nsf/webpages/thaox12x02x08>

Thao We Brave Bee Stings And All Kill Rock Stars Album Review

If you fell for [Feist](#) after hearing a few iPod Nano adverts (and Yael Naim from the Macbook Air advert), head out immediately and get yourself this disc before anyone else beats you to it. We Brave Bee Stings And All is better than The Reminder all ways up. The voices are almost identical, but We Brave Bee Stings carries a level of invention, oh-so-sexy sassiness, and sheer unadulterated great music throughout. It isn't a disc that draws you in on a couple of songs and leaves you stranded on the rest. Thao Nguyen's second album is a delight, even if it ticks very few conventional boxes - the lyrics are Ricky Lee Jones wacky at times (just listen to Bag of Hammers) - but listen to Swimming Pools or Geography and you'll either be hooked or you'll head off looking for the safe blandness of a [Kate Walsh](#). Nguyen is of Vietnamese descent, from Washington, DC, and there are references to her father's departure at an early age, but none of that is overt on anything other than a very deep listed - the songs have a restless energy and enthusiasm that is refreshing. This is pop music for people who are smarter than a 10 year old.

Rating 9/10

Mike Rea

This is what I know: The lead singer of Virginia-based outfit The Get Down Stay Down is named Thao Nguyen. Nguyen is the sole female in this otherwise all boy band, and, with that in mind, creates androgynous sounding vocals. Thao constructs songs that have hints of country, pop, and '70s folk, all wrapped around a blanket of whimsical musical accompaniments.

What I am guessing: Somebody liked the concept of a semi-folk sounding band, that could fit into today's contemporary indie rock genre, with the selling point of the band being that the lead singer, who sounds quite a bit like a guy, is actually a girl.

The sound: More or less, another band straight out of the lite indie bin. Thao plays music of the "I really dig Cat Power school of singology," pleasant and sweet, though ultimately leaving little onto which one can easily cling. That isn't to say that it's a complete failure, or that there aren't any songs worth hearing. In particular, pay attention to the songs "Geography" and "Swimming Pools," as the lyrics on both songs are riveting. Furthermore, they're the best songs on the album.

Though, as an afterthought, after listening to this album a few times, I've discovered a great thing—Thao's lyrics can be quite comical. She writes about what she sees, in only a way I'm sure only she could depict. Still, this is an album I could ultimately pass on, and I tossed it on top of the to-be-recycled pile. After my doing so, however, my friend picked it up, listened to it, and found it irresistible. She said she loved it because "of the softness, and the airy quality of it." Yes, indeed, one girl's shit is another's shinola.

Ayn Averett
02.15.2008

Thao Nguyen: *Like the Linen* [Trust Me Corporation]

At first glance, I thought for sure I was not going to like this album. I'm not sure what it is about the cover or the album title. *Like the Linen*, I was immediately put off by; but I was wrong, and I am glad I was. Thao Nguyen delivers ten poppy acoustic guitar driven songs with appropriate yet minimalist backing instruments. From the get go the riffs are catchy and soothing, familiar and comfortable. Thao's voice is not overwhelmingly good but is perfect for these songs. It's the pinch of imperfection that makes you feel close to the singer-songwriter, and there is a deep level of intimacy throughout this album that makes you feel loved or at least not alone.

Nguyen comes from Northern Virginia, and in her debut album, she delivers one of my favorite albums of the year. Romance dominates a great deal of her material, with the typical angles covered; falling in and out of love, fear of intimacy, co-dependency, etc. But it is the way she says it or perhaps how she says it that makes Nguyen's approach different from most. In the song Tallymarks, she opens the track stating, *I cant explain it Im afraid of noise/ And all this time still afraid of boys*. Although not a complex line she delivers it like she means it from the heart. She's not just another guitar playing gal delivering lyrics generic to her gender. It really is her humanness that is appealing.

The songs Hills, Tallymarks, Vision in Red, and Moped" are my personal picks of the album. On Hills she claims, *Well, Ill take you to the hills/ The size of a movie screen/ They are showing still/ Ill spin you round myself/ Dizzy us up/ And shake us well*. Vision in Red is an easy to listen to, upbeat track with a sweet little slide guitar part. Moped is just a fun song, both sweet and sour, that makes you feel young.

Do yourself a favor, and get to know Thao Nguyen; it's easy if you buy this album.

– Nelson Heise, 11/28/2005

We Brave Bee Stings and All

Release Date: January 29, 2008

Label: [Kill Rock Stars](#)

Rating: **7.5** out of 10

By John Zeiss

A generation of girlish singer-songwriters is blooming in the United Kingdom, but the new female talent sprouting stateside is a little older, a little wiser, and, my Yankee pride be damned, just a little better. Give me Marissa Nadler any day over Lily Allen. Or [Thao](#) Nguyen over Kate Nash.

Youthful energy abounds on *We Brave Bee Stings and All*, the debut from the twenty-three-year-old Nguyen. Nguyen's husky voice at times recalls Chan Marshall's, but it's a testament to her originality and talent that it's mostly difficult to decipher her influences. And even the new, better-adjusted Cat Power isn't making music this buoyantly happy.

The album begins strong with the eagerly strummed, earnestly sung "Beat (Health, Life, and Fire)," on which Nguyen warns that, rather than being ready to settle down, she's always apt to "run like a bandit." She alludes to childhood throughout the album, from the mention of ice cream in "Bag of Hammers" to the title of "Big Kid Table." And "Swimming Pools" shimmers with nostalgia for Nguyen's upbringing in suburban Virginia.

"Geography" is the center of *Bee Sting's* musical map. A lumbering drum intro collapses into a hazy, repetitive keyboard line. Then Nguyen comes in complaining, "Oh geography is gonna make a mess of me," selling the line with such conviction that it doesn't really matter what the hell she means. Later she laments, "My mouth a confessional cannon/ Run away from me with the most reckless of abandon."

"Geography" is the album's fifth song, and after it not much else stands out. There are more handclaps, some horns, some pretty piano, and Nguyen's sometimes too-cutesy lyrics, like "I worked my

arms so hard just to give you an airplane ride” from “Feet Asleep.” But the album’s stellar start serves as a quality kick-off to her career. A member of the venerable Kill Rock Stars roster, Nguyen harks back to a time when true musicianship, rather than Internet page hits, got you noticed.

http://www.cokemachineglow.com/record_review/3094/thao-nguyen-and-the-get-down-stay-down

Thao Nguyen and the Get Down Stay Down

We Brave Bee Stings and All
(Kill Rock Stars; 2008)

Rating: 73%

Combined Rating: 73%

Musical artists short on talent but big on cutes have long applied their adorability like too much foundation over a pimply mug: essentially a pretty mask covering the flaws beneath. Recent Kill Rock Stars signee Thao Nguyen could have easily pulled this off and fooled many in the process. I mean, she sounds like Cat Power’s plucky adopted sister, and her live performances pack enough breezy charisma to bring to mind Leslie Feist. And yeah, and she’s pretty cute too. Still, to attribute Nguyen’s success as a performer to her adorability would be selling her short because, as her latest album *We Brave Bee Stings and All* proves, she’s got plenty of solid indie-pop songs hiding behind that precious visage. Plus, holding her to her face would be pretty fucking shallow.

That said, Nguyen’s second long-player is a confident step forward from the simpler candy-folk of her debut *Like the Linen* (2005) (whose title jabs at her kindergarten classmates’ tendency to pronounce Thao as “Towel”). Here, Nguyen’s songwriting is, for the most part, focused and straightforward, and her songs, augmented by her now-full-time backing band The Get Down Stay Down, pack a stronger punch and bigger hooks than most anything on her debut. Look no further than the new version of “Feet Asleep” which first appeared on the Kill Rock Stars compilation *The Sound and the Hare Heard*. Whereas that song’s earlier incarnation relied mostly on banjo, minimal percussion, and a few vocal overdubs -- and sounded like the work of a single

voice in the studio -- her reworking with *The Get Down Stay Down* is predictably fuller and far more celebratory, generously adding splashes of Memphis brass and saloon-style piano to her bouncy guitar strumming. Nguyen follows the horns' trembling sway as she belts, "And oh, so little time / I have gotten old / This shock and awe it owns" with a bravado that belies her needlessly worrisome lyrics. I mean, how old is she anyway?

The Get Down Stay Down's presence remains strong throughout the rest of the album's opening two-thirds, and Nguyen strikes gold several times along the way. "Beat (Health, Life, and Fire)" is the first of several songs on the album to dwell on the themes of pain and courage to which the album's title so inconspicuously alludes. "Beat my bra / Beat my chest / Beat the ones who love me the best," she sings with steely resolve over drummer Willis Thompson's martial thwacks. Like many of the songs on *Bee Stings*, "Beat" is about personal struggle and lost love as much as it is about rising above said struggle and loss. And, of course, it never hurts to have a sweet melody on your tongue when undergoing this daily strife. Similarly, on first single "Bag of Hammers" Nguyen is self-referential in her description of the spoonful of sugar she's feeding us sad souls: "And as sharp as I sting / As sharp as I sing / It just soothes you / Doesn't it? / Like a lick of ice cream." Well played, Nguyen: now you've stolen not just our hearts, but our taste buds as well.

Nguyen rounds out *Bee Stings*'s fine opening stretch with the countrified "Big Kid Table" and banjo-led "Swimming Pools," with the latter begging to be covered by Feist. (Here's looking at you, *Fantasy Podcast 2008*...) Excepting the aforementioned "Feet Asleep," however, the rest of the songs mostly fail to reproduce the fine-tuned pop that frontloads the album. "Yes, So On So On" and "Fear and Convenience" manage to sound a lot like the songs that preceded them, though in a less memorable fashion. Still, the album's first real misstep occurs on "Violet," wherein Nguyen's high-pitched delivery seems strained and cloying. Also, the easy-breezy vibe of "Travel" and "We Go" whiff a little too strongly of Jack Johnson-owned beachfront property, and they conclude the album on a bit of a sour note. Graciously, there's no use in quibbling too much over three duds in an 11-track album, especially since the album's truest success is in the growth of the album's star. If Nguyen's next album

improves on *Bee Stings* as much as that album improved on *Like the Linen*, I doubt I'll have much cause for complaint at all. Or much of a reason to mention her looks.

http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/record_review/47885-we-brave-bee-stings-and-all

Thao and the Get Down Stay Down
We Brave Bee Stings and All
[Kill Rock Stars; 2008]
Rating: 7.7

The past few years have given us scores of adolescently regressive males presented as pop culture heroes. In fact, it's become something of a cliché even to note that movies and sitcoms typically pit schlumpy, carefree, childlike guys against willful, no-fun, grown-up women. Depending on whom you ask, *Knocked Up* managed to find some middle ground between the two poles, but it seems to be an exception. Until Hollywood gives us a good portrayal of the adolescent-leaning female, we have Portland-based Thao Nguyen and her backing band the Get Down Stay Down, who specialize in galloping indie pop with sugar-coated hooks, a frosting of horns, and a considerable dark streak. The 23-year-old singer-songwriter, whose expressive voice suggests an earthbound Beth Orton, sings about such youthful concerns as ice cream cones and cannonballs off diving boards, but with unexpected maturity, dignity, and charm. These qualities make her second full-length, *We Brave Bee Stings and All*, sound so immediately distinguished and spirited. Even that title makes a child's fear sound as epic as *300*.

At this retrospective time of year, this point of view feels especially fresh and significant. Nguyen isn't merely the old archetype of the female as innocent naïf, but rather one who takes that youthful vision and marries it to a sly and incisive wisdom. Nguyen's is a remembered childhood both personal and universal. Describing herself as "a small kid at the big kid table," Nguyen has a sharp eye for small, telling details, which could form the bedrock of a young adult novel but here inform songs simultaneously life-size and larger-than-life. "We brave bee stings and all," she sings on "Swimming Pools", as her banjo pushes the music to a running pace. "We don't dive, we cannonball." She beatboxes at the beginning of

"Geography", whose opening line-- "Geography is gonna make a mess of me"-- could be about a long-distance relationship or third period.

"Feet Asleep", which appeared on last year's Kill Rock Stars comp *The Sound the Hare Heard*, begins unassumingly, with Nguyen singing against a folksy acoustic guitar theme, then the band launches into a brassy Dixieland-style chorus-- one of the album's fullest and most joyful moments-- as Nguyen turns bad circulation into a metaphor for romantic complacency. Those horns pop up again more quietly on "Violet", drawing frowns across the song as she bids farewell to a friend. Throughout *Bee Stings*, the Get Down Stay Down keep the music light and fast-paced, revealing a broad range of styles but never boasting about it, and Tucker Martine's suitably slack production emphasizes the sharpness of her voice and the playfulness of her melodies. On "Fear and Convenience", she asks, "Did he hurt you in a new way?" Nguyen sounds generally curious, even as the darker implications of her question loom over the song. *Bee Stings* is, in a sense, a coming-of-age album, as serious themes underscore her jaunty melodies and adult concerns encroach on her summery youthfulness. Nguyen strikes a fine balance between the two, but here's hoping she doesn't grow up too much.

-[Stephen M. Deusner](#), February 04, 2008