

Press from the 2008 release of DRAWN TO DUST

All Music: "Lichtenstein turns out to be a surprisingly effective pop songwriter, with a particular knack for choruses that subtly insinuate themselves into the subconscious after only a couple listens"

- allmusic.com

Drawn to Dust is the pop debut of indie film score composer Max Avery Lichtenstein (Tarnation, Jesus' Son, etc.), working under the collective name Camphor. As one would expect from an artist with Lichtenstein's background, there is an uncannily cinematic quality to Drawn to Dust: tracks like the opening "Daybreak" and the mid-album respite for strings, "Beauty in Ruins," are as carefully orchestrated and exquisitely arranged as the most effective film score. Even more pop-oriented songs, like the country-tinged "Castaway" and "Confidences Shattered" have an epic, elegant quality one doesn't often associate with this brand of indie rock. The closest musical comparisons are Broken Social Scene (a similarly open-ended, collective structure that adds greatly to the album's sonic variety) and Talk Talk, whose later albums delved into a similar blend of dreamy pop, modern classical, and third stream jazz. The album's secret weapon, however, is that Lichtenstein turns out to be a surprisingly effective pop songwriter, with a particular knack for choruses that subtly insinuate themselves into the subconscious after only a couple listens. Even a lot of the best-known bands working in this approximate style, including the Flaming Lips, get by on atmosphere and vibe much of the time, but Drawn to Dust's combination of lovely, often fascinating layered arrangements and substantial melodies makes it a more satisfying album than many similar works. - Stewart Mason

PopMatters: "Drawn to Dust is a beautifully organic album, full of songs with a complexity that practically breathes and whose life cycle you can hear."

– popmatters.com

If there's one main complaint I would make about Camphor's debut album, *Drawn to Dust*, it's that it was released during the wrong season. *Drawn to Dust* is not a springtime album. As its title suggests, rather than calling forth renewal and fresh life, this is an album that finds beauty in decay and whose songs seem to exist in that yellowing grey light of an autumn dusk that links a shortening day to a chilly night. "Everywhere you look are piles of bones / And everyone you meet are piles of bones ... But oh how inspiring / Oh how real" is a typical sentiment expressed on this album—not exactly what you typically listen to while surrounded by newly blooming daffodils.

That's not a serious complaint, though, because beauty in decay is still beauty. *Drawn to Dust* is a beautifully organic album, full of songs with a complexity that practically breathes and whose life cycle you can hear. Each song is a case study in the chemical interaction of elements, with rustic strings and woodwinds mixed with extra-terrestrial static and buzz and with highly structured chamber compositions fading roughly into ambient nature recordings. The album is structured as the cycle of a day, beginning with "Daybreak" and ending with "Sundown". Lyrically, the album focuses on the end of that life cycle, and the frequently lovely phrasings contrast with the bleakness of the subject matter. "American beauty withering on the vine", singer and songwriter Max Avery Lichtenstein intones, "Saccharine smile rotting at the root / Needle nose bulldoze pulling the sweetest tooth". And you can hear the "water drops drizzle from the joints between all of the pipes" on "Button Up", as keyboard and glockenspiel notes echo drip- drops around the words.

Lichtenstein cut his professional teeth scoring independent films, writing the music that lay under stories that ranged from the outlandish American Gothic (*The King*) to a raw documentary about growing up with a mentally ill mother, culled from home movies, answering machine recordings, still photos, and letters (*Tarnation*). Lichtenstein says that his songwriting for Camphor came about as an effort to explore music "un- tethered" from the strict emotional and storytelling

requirements of film scores, and in some ways *Drawn to Dust* sounds like he just reversed the process, writing the movie for a film before a film exists rather than the other way around. The dirge-like piano chords, strings, bells, and horns that build and then disperse on opener “Daybreak” conjure the anticipation that builds until the first rays of sunlight break over the horizon in an exceptionally visual way, and the rest of the album is similarly visceral. This album would score an unusual and inventive movie, though. Album centerpiece “Castaway”, for example, is a rhythmic sea shanty underscored by a flamenco beat and mariachi horns. One imagines an impassioned tete-a-tete performed by a pirate and his mistress on the slanting deck of a sinking ship.

Perhaps because of both the cinematic and organic nature of the album, some of the songs feel merely transitional, used for the listener to exhale between the peaks of the standout tunes. But the standout tunes are excellent. When Lichtenstein sings these lines on “Tired Light”, you can hear the atmosphere crackle, with low-fi midrange fuzzing over the layers of slide guitar, horns, and piano:

**With borrowed heat from distant fires
Ashes from a spark**

**I feel you shiver in the dark
And I will burn for you**

**A swirl of light and fire
Celebration pyre**

“Button Up” has a similar liltingly pretty melody with a celestial-sounding base complementing the descriptions of haloed moons and tiny, tinny voices emanating from electronic devices. “The Sweetest Tooth” relies on a slow bass and piano groove before blowing out into an explosive chorus, and the playful whistling, hand-claps, and sing-along accusations of betrayal on “Confidences Shattered” make me wish that Lichtenstein had channeled more frustration in this upbeat way and subbed out some of the droning that makes other tunes seem to run together.

All of the songs are anchored by Lichtenstein’s throaty singing voice, which has the intensity and vocal timbre of Beck’s *Sea Change* melancholia. Like the other instruments on this album, Lichtenstein’s voice sounds soothing now, and you can imagine it sounding even better later in the

year, when paired with the crackling of falling leaves, completing the end of the life cycle to which Lichtenstein is so astutely attuned. - Maura Walz

Tiny Mix Tapes: "picture-perfect atmosphere..."

- <http://www.tinymixtapes.com>

One of the requirements of reviewing is to put the weight of your analysis entirely on the album. Unfortunately, this becomes a bit of a difficult task when faced with a press kit that is written largely in such self-lauding riddles as Camphor's, featuring lines like "The substance known as camphor has historically been used... for the embalming of the dead... The music of Camphor has many of the same powers." While I'd like to get into the difficulties one might confront when trying to embalm your dog's body with the power of song, I only really bring this up to emphasize that this is a clear example of why not to judge an album based on its advertising. Drawn to Dust is actually a really lovely surprise of an album.

Grown primarily out of the songwriting of composer Max Avery Lichtenstein (Jesus' Son, The King, Tarnation), Drawn to Dust takes from the shared buffet of introspective indie themes, with Lichtenstein's voice humming through with a 60-watt glow as he waxes on about loss and love. But what makes him intriguing is his ability to incorporate the subtle lo-fi aesthetic while avoiding the unassuming subtlety of lo-fi composition, instead creating what could be considered three-minute-long folk-based scores in their singular richness. Lichtenstein trades in the simple mechanics of introspective folk for an Elysian field of woodwinds and Mellotrons set against a synthesis of lo-fi acoustics and his very own lost shepherd guttural croon. This picture-perfect atmosphere is pumped through to every song like independent vignettes of stories that could propel their own film adaptation. - Cor Limey

Filter: "...an immaculate first album."

- Filter Magazine

New York-based indie-pop troupe Camphor - aka the love-child of songwriter/indie film composer Max Avery Lichtenstein - has crafted and produced an immaculate first album. Highlighting Max's engrossing voice and expressive lyrics, *Drawn to Dust* is atmospheric and organic, albeit dark at moments. Aiding Max in the musical journey is an ensemble of indie music vets: Gretta Cohn (Bright Eyes), D. James Goodwin (New London Fire), Ryan Smith (Stars Like Fleas) and Kevin Thaxton (Grand Mal).

"The Sweetest Tooth" from the Camphor debut features a soothing male voice, a soft piano drone, and a sweeping melody. The song seems almost predictable until the slightly sped-up bridge where clashing fanfare ensues and Max cries, "Give me something for the pain." A violin is added to allay the abrasive change, but the motif returns with an experimentally dissonant outro.

Detour: "This is music of worn wood and rough fabric made smooth, and it has a wonderfully lived in feel..."

- Detour Magazine

The influence of Beck's dusty, midnight sun side is so evident in Camphor's sound as to be elementary. The nice thing about this quietly listenable, lyrical debut from New York-based singer, songwriter and film music composer Max Avery Lichtenstein and his collaborators is how tastefully it takes its influences to heart. "All the elements are here/Fire, water, blood, and fear," Lichtenstein sings, ever sighing just half way, in "Button Up." "It's colder out there than you know," he continues, and then a pause. "...But not before you go." And as the song's warm vintage organ tones rise to meet its quietly hopeful chorus, it's clear that Camphor is operating organically within the elemental, soulful mud that defined Beck's *Sea Change*. This is music of worn wood and

rough fabric made smooth, and it has a wonderfully lived in feel for being such a new project. Other highlights include the spontaneous orchestral rush of "Sweetest Tooth," "Beauty in Ruins," (little more than a mournful string and brass arrangement), and "Confidences Shattered," where handclaps and whistles dress up a folk melody that wouldn't be out of place amid the diaries of Billy Bragg. A fine album full of understated charm, Drawn to Dust might make you miss those college rock days of yore. — Johnny Loftus

Outburn: "... more or less flawless ..."

– Outburn Magazine

Camphor is the latest project of composer/songwriter Max Avery Lichtenstein, of movie soundtracks, with credits for Tarnation, The King, and Jesus' Song. Lichtenstein has composed for indie movies with complex, sometimes dark, very human subject matter, and these moods are further explored with this band projects. Drawn to Dust opens with a funeral vibe for "Daybreak." As horns join forces with echoing piano, the mood becomes all the more majestic and grave. Lichtenstein's gentle, brooding vocals evoke Thom Yorke - you can file Camphor between Radiohead and Anathema. The first half of the album is a slow burner, a sophisticated blend of modern indie sensibility with traditional

orchestration. "The Sweetest Tooth" stands out for its clever lyrics, with subtle, thought-provoking turns of phrase like, "Used to be proud, now just full of pride." Though more or less flawless, the first stretch of the album is not particularly memorable. The big payoff comes later, with tracks like "Castaway," with its gypsy surf strains and storytelling vocal style, or the deceptively breezy, whistling folk of "Confidences Shattered," which cheerfully recounts some force or person who blows through life wrecking casual, thoughtless havoc. - Katie Vrabel

Big Takeover: "one studio project that more people should be aware of."

- Big Takeover Magazine

Max Avery Lichtenstein, AKA Camphor, has written scores for many films, including Jesus' Son and Tarnation. This is his orchestral group which features members of Mercury Rev, Beirut, Bright Eyes, and his own New York band, Timesbold. Things start with a bang when, after an instrumental buildup, track two, "Deconstruction" blossoms into a great pop moment, church bells and all. Camphor sings "Everything's coming apart at the seams," but this well-constructed song has no such worries. This is one studio project that more people should be aware of, surely finding favor with fans of Talk Talk, Sparklehorse, and Mercury Rev. - Jack Rabid

First Coast: "...a downcast masterpiece..."

- First Coast News

The substance known as camphor has historically been used in religious ceremonies, as moth repellent, as an ingredient in fireworks, for the embalming of the dead, and for medicinal purposes. The band Camphor it could be said has many of the same properties. Wrapped in vellum and hinting at the fragile nature of the band, the cover of their new album Drawn to Dust makes an impression that serves to intrigue as figuring out how to just get the CD out is as fascinating as the music that the cover houses.

Sounding something like a moodier Elbow mixed with some subtle hints of Nick Cave lost on a dusty plain somewhere, Camphor see things in an expansive emotive way with their songs. Drawn to Dust is a downcast masterpiece that's as atmospheric as it is dark. This wide open body of work is put together using a variety of instrumentation that Camphor uses much like a painter who adds different color and strokes to a painting for more dimension. With horns, melodeons, lo-fi electronics, whistling, strings and even an optigan each layer and sound gives the songs on Drawn to Dust added volume and texture.

While a vast majority of the songs here are voluminous and almost orchestral, Camphor does occasionally run into something rather upbeat and almost pop. "Confidences Shattered," for example, is a dusty country song that twangs its way across three minutes in an almost jolly jangle despite it's rather depressing title. But for the most part though, Drawn to Dust is all about scope, dimensionality and melodrama. With song titles such as, "Immolation," "Beauty in Ruins," and "Castaway," you kind of get the general idea.

Drawn to Dust is a stunning rich multi-layered effort that shows a band hoping to create something more than a simple pop song. Camphor have achieved that on Drawn to Dust and as long as they continue creating lush, large screened, and far-reaching songs that are half as good as the material here, they will continue to do so. - Paul POP!

BiBaBiDi: "What an immaculate album!"

- <http://www.bibabidi.com/>

Friendly Fire Recordings is a label with one hell of a track record. No duds. No slow periods. No boring releases. And certainly, the eclectic label can't be fingered as going along with any trends (I use "trend" in a negative manner here). Mind, this is the company that brought you both the sultry wall-of-sound shoegaze of Asobi Seksu and the hypnotic psych-pop of the Whitsundays. BBBB gives a big thumbs up to Friendly Fire.

The NYC-based label's latest offering is Camphor's (MySpace) debut LP, Drawn to Dust. What an immaculate album! Imagine a sublimely produced re-do of Beck's Sea Change. This is vibrant folk-rock that's truly understated by either of those two classifications joined by a hyphen. (It ain't "folk" and it's not straight-up "rock" -- think outside the box!)

The record has folk elements -- in terms of its use of vocals and rhythm guitar it drips of the genre -- but listen to "The Sweetest Tooth" three, four times (I'm now on my seventh spin), and your ear will be delighted to turn up much, much more beneath the surface. Sparse drumming that sensually intertwines with an old-timey piano ditty; a Wurlitzer-esque line accents the layered and soft-spoken singing; a climax coming in around the 1:45 mark -- "Give me something for the pain!/ A little something for it" -- only to descend back into a refreshed verse (with a hint of violin).

Camphor's debut is expertly constructed and arranged, and -- more importantly -- catchy and hooking. Put this one on and you'll be hard pressed to find a good reason to skip any song, ignore a few here and there, or pull one in particular as a favorite. - NIK MERCER

Stereo Subversion: "Camphor make a whole album that could be interpreted in many different ways, all of them good." –

- stereosubversion.com

Camphor is Max Avery Lichtenstein's stab at an alt-rock band. It's a contemporary sounding pastiche of fractured indie rock and experimental production that draws the listener in with dreamy yet abrasive production and quick tempo and mood changes. There are a lot of different sounds flying around, and Camphor deftly orchestrates the chaos into an intriguing album of progressive horn and piano driven, bull-in-a-china-shop indie rock songs.

Lichtenstein has produced music for indie movies including Tarnation, Jesus' Son, and the King, and seemingly on a whim decided to try his hand at making a rock album. For Drawn to Dust he enlisted indie-rock colleagues James Goodwin, Gretta Cohn, Ryan Smith, and Kevin Thaxton, as well as several other bit players to help round out the sound.

The wry mood is reminiscent of bands like Cursive and Badly Drawn Boy with sonic influences from Radiohead's later work evident. Lichtenstein and company use an array of instruments and samples to produce an album of tuneful songs juxtaposed with spooky, otherworldly production.

Horns small and large abound. Take the Vaudevillian proclivities out of Chase Pagan and replace with guitar distortion and you'll find Camphor.

The film score influences are plain to see on the album's varying moods and sounds. Just as a good movie uses several different musical styles to help tell the story and define its characters, Camphor jump from guitar driven slow indie rock, to tuba blasts, then to keyboard and samples aided by percussion in a single song. Lichtenstein sounds at home in this post-genre atmosphere.

"Daybreak" starts the album with a spooky piano and horn driven shard of a song. "Deconstructed" is also piano driven in its verse with abrupt string interludes and functions to do just as its title implies to the contemporary indie rock sound used by artists like Iron and Wine and Sea Wolf.

"The Sweetest Tooth" is a loud/soft melodic guitar and piano driven rock song. Lichtenstein sings of a culture that is "under the gun, over the line/ American beauty withering on the vine/ Saccharin smile rotting at the root/ Needle nose bulldoze, pulling the sweetest tooth." A society that is "Self- indulgent and cultivated to consume" that wants to simply dull the pain. The end is a screeching violin freakout that may induce tooth pain in sensitive listeners.

"Castaway" is another guitar and horn driven rock song about a "Castaway girl in a pirated world." On it Lichtenstein takes his baritone voice into a lower devious sounding register to describe the troublemaking woman who attracts him in spite of himself. "Confidences Shattered" is a more traditional sounding rock song with rambling procession and acoustic guitar strumming that sings of someone who "cleaned us out while we were blind, stole our car and drank our wine." Whether Lichtenstein is making a statement about his generation and how consumerism has pillaged its self-concept or about some guy who used to live down the street who literally stole his car is open to interpretation. Thankfully, Camphor make a whole album that could be interpreted in many different ways, all of them good. - Justin Curtis