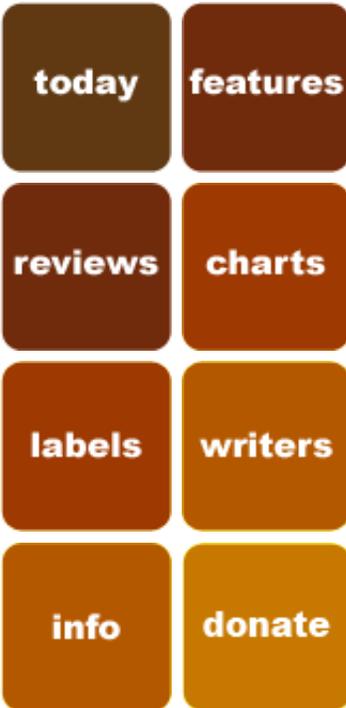


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## Dusted Features

Destined: Bachelorette



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Dusted's Jennifer Kelly profiles our first Destined selection of 2009: New Zealand avant-pop artist Bachelorette.

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You get the sense that Annabel Alpers, the New Zealand electro-pop artist known as Bachelorette, doesn't much care for *talking* about her delicate, multilayered songs. She'd rather not theorize about the nexus between synthetic tools and raw human feeling. She has no clear idea of where she's heading musically, after *My Electric Family*, the album she's mixing right now in New Zealand for release on Drag City this spring. She's perfectly happy to let that question resolve itself later, when she gets back to her computer to write new songs.

"I don't have a particular direction that I want to go in at all," she says, by phone, early on New Year's Eve 2008. "Every time I work on a song or an album, I'm always surprised with how it comes out, because it's not how I started out with it."

Yet you can't mistake this flexibility, this open-ness to the vagaries of inspiration, this refusal to articulate an artistic philosophy, for lack of purpose. "Sometimes I think the reason why I play music is that it's

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the way that I'm able to communicate to people," she says. "It's better than the way that I'm capable of communicating just through talking or the conventional kinds of communication that other people are satisfied with. That doesn't satisfy me. So, it's a way of trying to be satisfied with communicating with other people."

Alpers has been in and out of bands in her hometown of Christchurch for more than a decade, getting closest to the mainstream with psychedelic surf favorites, Hawaii Five-O, but also spending time in electronic noise bands like Space Dust and the Hiss Explosion.

Eventually, though, playing keyboards and guitars on other people's songs started to pall, and Alpers looked for another outlet. "I just started writing more of my own songs. It was getting harder to get my ideas across to the band," she said. "I had ideas that I really wanted to work on and really the only way to go about it was to go on my own. That's how Bachelorette came about. It was just having this collection of ideas that I wanted to record."

At the same time that she was splitting off on her own as a songwriter, Alpers was also pursuing a graduate degree in music at Auckland University, focusing on computer-based composition. The program gave her access to a broad array of equipment, gave her a good grounding in recording technology and, she says, allowed her to think beyond the constraints of ordinary songwriting. "I think the university was good in terms of pushing my boundaries," she says. "I had to get out of old habits and lazy ways of writing music, going beyond the obvious and exploring new possibilities." But, she adds, she always meant to apply this experimental aesthetic to tuneful, melodic songs. "My intention was always for doing more pop kind of stuff."

Alpers made a seven-song EP called *The End of Things* in 2005, overlaying staccato synths with whispery, surreal vocals. In the opening "My Electric Husband," Alpers sings quietly over a thicket of sharp keyboard stabs, little blurts of video-game noise punctuating ethereal wordless choruses. By "The End of Things," the closer, she has added the warmth of country guitar, the shimmering brush of looped harmonies to her palette, for a purity that never seems entirely natural.

Her first full-length, *Isolation Loops* followed two years later and represented a significant step forward. The album was recorded all alone, in a 1920s cottage (or "bach") near the ocean, that had been in Alpers' family for generations. There, with electricity but no hot water, Alpers spent weeks in total isolation, tweaking and retweaking her songs until she felt they were exactly right.

"I went out there to do it because it was a cheap place, where I wouldn't have to pay any rent and where I could spend a good amount of time just focusing on music and nothing else," she says. "I wasn't really doing it as a romantic, artistic statement. It was just practical, a

practical way of being able to spend time on music. Because otherwise, if I'm living in the city, I have to work full time to get by and it's really hard to focus on music."

She would arrive loaded up with supermarket supplies and stay the week, getting up early and working until she couldn't anymore. "There were sort of bursts where really good things happened and unexpected things happened, which made it exciting," she recalls. "And then there's the other side where I might spend a whole afternoon working on something and then just having to get rid of it all because it's not working."

That solitary labor paid off on *Isolation Loops*, an album that was sonically richer and more complicated than the EP, with layered vocal counterparts and live-sounding drums and guitars. Alpers sounds as forlornly gorgeous as Nico when she sings alone on this CD, yet elsewhere in multi-tracked harmonies, she builds Spector-esque spaces and girl group sweetness into her delicate songs. She turns tough, too, on piano-framed "Doo Wop," infusing angelic murmurs with unexpected snarl and rasp. It's a very accomplished album, full of surprises and unusual shadings, and it won Alpers a fair amount of attention. She toured New Zealand on the strength of it with Cassette and the Ned Collette Band, then did a six-week tour of the US, then supported Beach House in dates throughout Australia.

By contrast, *My Electric Family* is more collaborative and band-oriented. "I started out making music on my own because that was the easiest way of getting my ideas across and getting them recorded and finished," she says. "This album that I'm mixing at the moment has more instruments on it and it was getting to the point where I preferred to play with a band. It's not just that. It's gotten to the point where I really enjoy playing with other people."

"It's interesting because I sort of expected that it would be the same as last time," she explains. "But my ability to focus for long periods was ...I wasn't able to do that so much this time. It became more of a social album this time. I got more people involved."

She adds, "I did spend some time living out in that bach in the north island and I was out there for a few months with this album, but this time around I didn't have that isolation. I actually felt better about involving other people in it."

And as more people got involved – drummers, guitarists, and a brass band from Auckland – the album took on a direction of its own. "I've had a couple of different drummers who are much better drummers than I am...so that's pretty much their style that brings out the beats in the music. There were a couple of guitarists that I got to work on it that just bring better skills in those areas," she recalls. "That makes it more fun to work on because there's the element of the unknown that they bring to it. They can inspire me to come up with different idea

that I wouldn't come up with if I was doing it all by myself."

As before, with *Isolation Loops*, the album coalesced around a broad conceptual foundation. "Probably this is my academic background in music," says Alpers. "I generally need some sort of concept to get excited about the album as a whole. I like to feel like I have to complete some sort of personal mission." Still, she added, "As I record, that generally changes a bit. And maybe goes a slightly different direction. But it's good to have a tight concept at the start."

*Isolation Loops*'s unifying concept was the end of a romantic relationship. *My Electric Family*, by contrast, makes Alper's creative process its main subject. "This album was about my own relationship with machines -- and thinking about machines as being my family," she explains. "I was interested in exploring the idea of communication through machines. Because that is what computer based recording is."

Alpers says that she had a fairly definite idea of the vocal melodies and structures of her songs when she went into the studio, but that they changed during the recording process. Some songs came relatively easily. Others took months, even years. Alpers began work on one song on *My Electric Family* more than a year before recording. "I wasn't able to sit down and say, okay, I'm going to record this song and let's do it. It was almost like a puzzle that needed to be worked out over time," she says. "It took a whole year of just kind of going back to it for it to really unfold and write itself or construct itself."

Alpers' songs, like her process, balance craft and immediacy, intellectual rigor with serendipity. Although her latest work sounds a good deal more organic than *The End of Things*, it retains a good deal of the precision and clarity of electronically derived music. It is buoyant, infectious pop, with soaring vocal melodies and quirky keyboard fillips, yet skewed through the curving mirrors and alternate realities of experimental music.

Asked about her influences, Alpers skips past recent electro-pop bands, right over the synthy pioneers of the 1970s and 1980s and lands, unexpectedly, at the very beginnings of pop history. "I've always been interested in 1960s psychedelic music and 1970s," she admits. "It depends on how early you want to go, but probably one of the first bands that I was really passionately into was the Beatles. As a child and as a teenager, and I've always gone back to the Beatles."

Nearly all pop musicians are influenced by the Beatles in one way or another, but Alpers points to their balance of art and emotional transparency. "It's John Lennon, in particular," she explains. "His music was complex, but it was totally emotional. I think his songwriting, it came from him. He wasn't trying to be clever. From his songs, you'd just get that raw emotions, delivered in this really intricate, this really tasteful way. I always just loved the sounds, the guitar sounds and George Martin's production."

What about electronic artists? Alpers rattles through a list that includes Kraftwerk and Aphex Twin. “There’s a lot of stuff that I like. I wouldn’t say that there’s anything that I’ve tried to emulate,” she says. “I think the biggest influence of my sound is just what instruments I have available.”

Alpers has been working with voice, synthesizer, keyboards and guitars for most of her career, lately settling on a couple of stand-up organs as a signature element of her sound. She had access to a couple of organs a few months ago and recorded their sounds into her computer for later reference. She also hired a brass band to back her up on the musical hall exuberant “Dream Sequence,” from the new album. But she says that she’s not the type to rummage through gear stores or glue herself to eBay in search of just the right sound for her next set of songs.

“I just use whatever I had lying around to record my ideas,” she says. “It’s a little bit like playing when you’re a kid and you use whatever’s around to make a collage or something, and there’s not a whole lot of thought you put into it. I feel that about what I make. I’ll come across a sound and then I’ll say, OK, I like that. I’m going to use that. It’s a little haphazard in some ways, but I sort of like doing it that way, because you come out with something that you wouldn’t have planned.”

Alpers is finishing her new album now, putting together a band to play her songs live, and continuing to follow her music wherever it leads her. “The important thing for me is that ...I only want to keep playing music as long as I have something that I really need to express or communicate,” she says. “If I’m not doing it for those reasons then I don’t think I will keep playing. But as long as there’s some kind of need to get a particular sound out, as long as it’s enjoyable and as long as I’m doing it for the right reasons then I’ll be happy with where I go.”

By Jennifer Kelly

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