

# STARS OF THE LID

Rapidity is the hallmark of these times, and its sound is ceaseless rhythm. Major cities the world over are a constant swarm of access and operation: blaring advertisements, honking horns, doors opening, doors closing, construction, commerce, trains, cars, birds, dogs, people, walking, talking, texting, eating—one gigantic, polyrhythmic clatter that only grows louder and faster with each passing day. Pause. But what about the undertones?

“There are a lot of people who theorize that there’s a common frequency for urban environments,” says Brian McBride, one half of minimalist duo Stars of the Lid. From over his shoulder, the brakes of an Echo Park bus squeal. “They say there’s a lot of F-sharp, which is supposed to influence your mood in a very specific way. Total hogwash, but I do view those sounds as instruments in and of themselves—the minutiae of things present that everybody ignores. If I’m struggling with where to go in a piece of music, I’ll often turn to the sound of my environment to guide me.”

For fifteen years, Stars of the Lid have crafted quiet, textural soundscapes variably recalling Brian Eno’s ventures into ambience and drone, the *musique concrète* of Pierre Henry, and the classical minimalism of Henryk Górecki. In contemporary terms, think Boards of Canada reimagined as all texture and no electronics. It’s wordless, beatless music that evolves at a glacier’s pace, yet it is warm, sweeping, beautiful, and endlessly inviting—the perfect antidote to the rhythm of the city, even if it’s somewhat born of that same city’s hum.

McBride and his partner, Adam Wiltzie, have recorded seven albums since meeting in 1990, at the University of Texas at Austin’s student-run radio station, and in the process have become a three-tiered thing: Stars of the Lid is a musician’s band, full of nuance and orchestral aspiration; they’re critical favorites, touted for their cinematic sounds created without synths; and they’re a cult phenomenon for reasons most fans can’t describe, but who, when pressed about it, often mumble sentences full of urban foils.

The Lid’s most recent peaceful opus, 2007’s double-disc *And Their Refinement of the Decline* (Kranky), saw the duo expanding their melodic swath. Reverberating piano hits, swells of strings and horns, field recordings, movie clips, and loads of ethereal guitar were recorded and assembled by correspondence, with Wiltzie living in Brussels and McBride in Los Angeles. It was their first release in almost six years, and they’re now preparing to tour the U.S. for the first time in just as many.

“There’s this maxim that says, if you want to be a successful musical entity, you need a certain rate of release—the musical equivalent of publish or perish. That’s not something we care about.” McBride says this from behind bug-eyed sunglasses, taking a slow drag of a cigarette. He looks like Michael Stipe and Hunter S. Thompson crossed with a young boy, and his approach to the music business combines the aloof inclinations of all three. He shies from praise. He ignores the prevailing rules of his trade. He sort of hates being away from home. Wiltzie’s the same. “Staying in the limelight just isn’t relevant to us,” says McBride. “What’s important is our relationship with the music.”

It’s easiest to think of the Lid as a pair of rogue composers who come together when their, ahem, stars align. It’s actually been a decade since they’ve lived in the same city. Wiltzie moved to Belgium on a whim, in 2001. He does sound engineering for various bands and recently married the better half of his Dead Texan music+visuals project. McBride, who’s also working on a pop experiment called Bell Gardens, has changed locales in accordance with his unlikely day job. He’s an expert debate coach, currently working for the University of Southern California.

“I’m either very well-balanced or I’m schizophrenic,” he says, avoiding utterance of his college designation as “the Michael Jordan of debate.” “On the one hand, I have this very fast, word-based activity, and on the other, I have something that probably can’t move any slower, and with no words at all. Music is probably an attempt for me to decompress from the racing nature of debate.”

As a child, McBride would lay in bed as Bach seeped through his walls from the living room. The music obscured, he’d apply his own meaning to the sound, but he felt the same thing his father did, out where the compositions played pure: transcendence. McBride’s own music has a similar effect. Define this duo as you choose—whatever your racing nature, Stars of the Lid offer an out. [x]

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Brian McBride photographed by Sita Kaylin.com. Adam Wiltzie photographed by Christina Vantzou.com.