Philadelphia band gets an assist from Paramore frontwoman Hayley Williams on standout new album, in *Bigger Than the Sound.*
By James Montgomery

mewithoutYou's Ten Stories cover art
Photo: Pine Street

In September 2009, Hayley Williams gave me a tour of her home in Franklin, Tennessee. It wasn't the usual kind of rock-star pad, for about a million reasons (there were a lot of "I Love Lucy" Barbie dolls), most notably what was playing on her Michael Jackson turntable at the time: a copy of mewithoutYou's *It's All Crazy! It's All False! It's All a Dream! It's Alright.*

I only mention it now for a couple of reasons: One, it led to the first — and, to this day, *only* — conversation I've ever had with someone about mewithoutYou (they aren't exactly what you'd call a "unifying" band), and two, because as luck would have it, they have a new album out Tuesday (May 15), *Ten Stories,* which features Williams on a pair of tracks and is probably the best thing they've ever done. Or at least the most recent.

That's the thing about mewithoutYou, who, in case you aren't aware (and you probably aren't), hail from Philadelphia, have been making albums for a decade now (in between losing members to grad school/ their frontman threatening to quit and donate all his possessions to the poor) and have fashioned a sort of anti-career out of coming dangerously close to success, only to veer away at the last possible second (usually into an embankment or something): They are not exactly an easy band to like. Or pin down. Wait, that didn't come out right. What I meant to say is that they are a *challenging* band to like. And an impossible one to pin down. Which is, I suppose, why I only know two people who are actually fans.

Their first two albums, 2002's *[A B] Life* and '04's *Catch for Us the Foxes,* were careening, crashing exercises in sheer volume (I think the kids called it "post-hardcore"), the latter of which featured the sorta-single "January 1979," brought them a fair amount of mainstream attention and was, according to me at least, one of the best rock records of the past decade. They started wandering off the leaden path with '06's *Brother, Sister* and then fully embraced lead singer Aaron Weiss' spiritual voyages (and Sufi mysticisms) on *It's All Crazy,* ditching the wattage in favor of hushed tones and a genuine grace. Of course, they also thoroughly confused what remained of their core fanbase in the process, but that was almost beside the point.

Because with *Ten Stories* (which, in true mwY fashion, features 11 tracks), they've made it clear that they're never going to be the same roaring act they were in the early aughts. Instead, they seem to have stumbled into a kind of beatific balance: Sure, they still call songs stuff like "Fox's Dream of the Log Flume" and "Grist for the Malady Mill," and, yes, on occasion Weiss still sings/shouts/spouts like a freegan preacherman, but there is a honed focus to the album, a willful maturity and a confidence that only comes when bands realize they can pack as much of a punch with instrumentation as opposed to sheer *volume.* Part of this was probably inevitable, of course, but it bears mention that *Ten Stories* draws thematic inspiration from a book Weiss read about a circus-train crash in Montana (hey, why not?) and as such earns the distinction of not only being their most cohesive record, but the first where they don't seem all that concerned with converting the masses (sample quote from Weiss, circa the *Brother, Sister* album: "I want to tell people God is love. That's my eternal, unchanging reality"). Instead, this time out, they just seem *content.*

And that's exactly where they should be. From the pastoral guitar work of "Cardiff Giant" and the plaintive drift of "Aubergine" to the woozy dramatics of "Bear's Vision of St. Agnes" and blooming surge of album closer "All Circles," *Ten Stories* is very much an album born out of quiet confidence, of willful resignation. Sure, Weiss is still on his lifelong spiritual quest — on "East Enders Wives," he keens, "I'm still counting on you like an invisible rosary" — but he's mellowed significantly as the decade has worn on, perhaps finally finding some semblance of inner peace. They even manage to weave Williams into the mix with startling restraint (she is unquestionably the biggest name they've ever collaborated with, unless you could Sunny Day Real Estate's Jeremy Enigk): Her voice is less of a main attraction as it is an additional instrument, another part of the sonic flourish.

It's a truly great album — the kind only a group like mewithoutYou could make, and only at this point in their career (or whatever you want to call it). Call it maturity, if you want to, I prefer to think of it as artistic growth: an accomplished, beautiful record from an equally accomplished (if not severely overlooked) band. But who knows, with *Ten Stories,* that last bit might change. Hey, Hayley Williams is on it.

What do you think of mewithoutYou's latest music? Let us know in the comments!

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