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"Dare's unique blend of catchy pop sensibilities, otherworldly vocals, and whip-smart, acutely compelling lyrics make him one of my favorite bohemian singer songwriters ever."
—Jim White

Dare Dukes

Thugs and China Dolls

Starland Records

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The songs that make up Dare Dukes' smart and infectious sophomore album, *Thugs and China Dolls*, are a striking combination of incisive observation and sweet, doleful hooks. Looking past the shiny surfaces of the American everyday, the Savannah, GA-based singer-songwriter chronicles life on the margins, and renders its idiosyncratic characters and events in dramatic relief against the vibrant backdrop of his orchestral folk pop.

Thugs and China Dolls marks a new sonic direction for Dare. Recorded in Athens, GA, at Popheart Productions with Suny Lyons (pacificUV, Phosphorescent) co-producing, the full range of Dare's intricate compositions—sometimes hushed, sometimes howling—are richly rendered with banjo, accordion, mandolin, upright bass, cello, viola, trombone, trumpet, piano, and French horn. The multi-part vocal harmonies are especially notable. Dare has gathered an incredible cast of players: in addition to his band, the Blackstock Collection, the record features Thayer Sarrano (Of Montreal), JoJo Glidewell (Modern Skirts), the horn section for TV on the Radio, and Marla Hansen (Sufjan Stevens, My Brightest Diamond, The National). And guest producer Jim White, alt-folk songwriter and eccentric storyteller, infuses Dare's "Simon Says," an aching tribute to love's downward spirals, with the lush mournfulness of a chamber piece.



Born and raised in the exurb of San Jose, California, Dare grew up as the state blossomed into what he calls, "exit-ramp culture"—a maze of smoked-glass franchises and cookie-cutter subdivisions that took root along the vast network of interstate freeways. "Everyone knows the clichés about suburbia: It's a stark, sanitized landscape, pretty much soulless," Dare explains. "No one needs to remind us of that. I'm more interested in the poetry I see there—the weirdness, the anomalies, the resistance. Even in this unlikely grid you can find courageous people and precious things."

Moving to Minneapolis in his twenties, Dare began playing music as bands like Soul Asylum, Babes in Toyland, and the Jayhawks were emerging to define that city's post-Replacements sound. Influenced by

seminal post-punk groups like the Pixies and Fugazi, musical raconteurs like Tom Waits and Kurt Weill, and American outcast writers and artists such as William Faulkner and Joseph Cornell, Dare fronted the Penelopes, a frenetic quartet that was a fixture in the city's rock clubs. After moving to New York City, Dare took a hiatus from music to focus on writing a novel. Soon enough he began playing music again, and in 2008 he released his first solo effort, *Prettiest Transmitter of All*, which gained him a wide listenership and critical acclaim.

“America is a crazy landscape,” Dare says, “and it's getting crazier by the minute. The reality is a lot more interesting to me than what the nightly news depicts. The way I see it, it's a place filled with eccentric characters, all on their own strange mission—some nuts, some saner than the rest of us. These missions, these people, they are what my music is about.”

The song “Meet You at the Bus” is Dare's exuberant banjo-driven celebration of passion and its insistence on reckless abandon. Crushed by “black and blue skies” and uninspired by the “Las Vegas lipstick shrines” of their landscape, two lovers make a pact to follow the “flashing yellow lines” and take a bus to anywhere. Dare's lyrics describe the technicolor urgency of escape. And the instrumentation—including trombone, trumpet, banjo, and piano—support the irresistible beat while conjuring the ethereal realm to which the lovers aspire.

In thematic counterpoint to “Meet You at the Bus,” “Thugs and China Dolls” is a nursery-rhyme waltz warning the listener against life's unsavory characters and impulses. The opening lyric asks: “What of lascivious thugs and china dolls who come here to take you, lie, and cause disarray?” Dare's shimmering piano, evocative of Patrick Watson, moves at a gentle yet insistent pace. Doubled banjos, violas, percussion, and multi-part vocal harmonies build increasingly complex layers that, as the ambient bangs and crackles of a prepared piano rise, seem to threaten to fall apart by the last refrain: “Dear you can't have it all. Beware especially of what you want.”

“Jim Eggers' Parrot” tells the story of real-life character, Jim Eggers, who carries a caged African Grey parrot named Sadie in a backpack everywhere he goes as a safeguard against his psychotic and violent outbursts. Profiled in the *New York Times Magazine* and on *Radio Lab*, Eggers hears the voice of Sadie lovingly admonish him to remain calm whenever he begins to rapid cycle and lose control. The engine of Dare's uptempo and jangly ballad is a big and crunchy Neutral Milk Hotel-inspired chord progression, strummed on acoustic guitar. Accordion, mandolin, tambourine, and trombone push the lazy but lively, foot-stomping rhythm, and a crowd of voices sing out Sadie's refrain: “Jim hold tight, you know it'll be all right.”

With *Thugs and China Dolls* due January 17, and a tour of the East Coast scheduled for January and February, Dare is eager to have the album heard. He's got a head full of ideas, and he's already begun work on a new batch of songs. He plans to go back into the studio in early Spring 2012 after finishing support for *Thugs and China Dolls*.