

MOONRiiVR *Vol.1*

MOONRiiVR is a brand new band from Toronto, and the music they play is new, too, although one could be forgiven for thinking otherwise at first glance. This is because the members of MOONRiiVR – who, in all honesty, could be considered an “all-star band” (more on that later) – have managed to achieve that tricky feat of making an album that sounds like it could have been recorded any time in the last 60 years. Listening to their debut album, aptly title *Vol. 1*, is like entering an unfamiliar room down a long hallway, closing the door quietly behind you, and finding oneself lost in a different world, one where you're not sure whether you're looking forward, backward, or perhaps even into a mirror.

The songs on *Vol. 1* are made by people with large, wide-ranging musical appetites, and their stew is a potent one; shades of '50s rock & roll, '60s R&B and country, and the increasingly ornate sonic palettes of the '70s come together on warm analog tape, laced with sweetly reverberating guitars, wonky old string synths, and nimble percussive environments. And MOONRiiVR's knack for creating sonic environments that are at once lightly trippy and wholly inviting means that, as much as *Vol. 1* draws on inspirations from decades past, it maintains a pleasing, distinctly out-of-time feel.

Back in the spring of 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, Gavin Gardiner – best known as the frontperson for Juno-nominated indie-folk mainstays The Wooden Sky, and as a producer & engineer at All Day Coconut studios for artists such as Fiver, Jason Collette, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson – found himself with a little extra time on his hands, and readily accepted an invitation to visit his friend “Champagne” James Robertson at his family farm north of Toronto. Normally busy playing lead guitar with acts like Lindi Ortega and Dwayne Gretzky, Robertson was similarly adrift during those strange early pandemic days. The two had been circling around each other for many years in the Toronto music scene, but had yet to work on a proper project together; so, armed with a vintage Tascam 388 tape recorder, a nylon string guitar, and some microphones, the two got stuck in and quickly realized that the project was starting to take the shape of something very special.

After this initial round of writing and recording sessions at the farm, the two decamped back to Toronto where they roped in first-call bassist Ben Whitely (The Weather Station, Basia Bulat, Julia Jacklin) and percussionist extraordinaire Lyle Molzan (Kathleen Edwards, Corb Lund), and continued tweaking and refining during weekly sessions at All Day Coconut. The two added a new layer of depth to the proceedings, with Whitely's tasteful, earthy bass playing providing a warm anchor to the music, and Molzan largely eschewing a standard drumkit in favour of shakers, bongos, and other sundry percussive items.

Finally, MOONRiiVR returned to the farm to pull the whole thing together. Coincidentally, the farm was in the middle of a renovation; its visual face-lift aptly mirrored the gestation of *Vol. 1* and this inspiring locale could perhaps even be viewed as a fifth member of the band, or at least a co-producer. They set up shop in different areas of the farm, and took advantage of this unusual recording space, placing guitar amplifiers in cars and opening and closing the car doors to adjust sound leakage during recording, and letting the natural ambient sounds of their rural environs seep into the background of the songs. Gardiner in particular delighted in this refreshing change from the status quo, re-setting himself with this open-ended, at times magical creative process, which he says “really opened up a whole new musical world to me that I had heard in the music I loved, but never had a path to get to before.”

Musically, the result is beautifully burnished set of pop songs cut through with a supremely “human” feel. For all the overdubbing and evident studio prowess at work on *MOONRiiVR Vol. 1*, one very much gets a sense of people in a room together. The music speaks to the varied interests of the band, and the astute listener may catch whiffs of Damian Jurado's Richard Swift-produced albums, Portishead's *Third*, the more relaxed side of the Rolling Stones, and Les Paul's home-recorded multi-track experiments. The band half-jokingly likened the album to “Buddy Holly meets Krautrock”, and as unlikely a pairing as that is, it's not far off the mark.

Lyricaly, these songs could not be more wide ranging, providing a winning contrast to the laser focus of MOONRiiVR's sonic architecture. Running the gamut from highly personal reflections on finding pleasure in the minutiae of everyday life on “Blonde Hair Now” to meditations on some of the more disturbing and inescapable developments in world politics over the last few years (“Midnight at the Garden Hotel”, “Flowers on the Fire Escape”), Gardiner deftly addresses these seemingly disparate thought-poles with a balance of opacity and directness. While he's not beating the listener over the head, he's certainly not shying away from uncomfortable topics, be it climate change or navigating relationship schisms that developed around divergent pandemic politics. It's the kind of record that can thrum warmly in the background but also pays dividends for those listeners willing to dig a little deeper.

MOONRiiVR Vol. 1 will be available on ____ through Victory Pool Records, online and at your nearest independent record store.

(Chris Dadge, 2023)