

The New York Times

Riding the Wave of High Expectations

By NATE CHINEN

Published: May 21, 2009

On what might have been his last quiet morning at home for a while, Ed Droste, a singer in the acclaimed indie-rock band Grizzly Bear, pattered around the kitchen of his railroad apartment one recent Saturday in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Thanks to the year's-best-album buzz around Grizzly Bear's third full-length release, "Veckatimest," out this week on Warp, Mr. Droste was preparing for a storm of activity, beginning with an appearance on a popular British television show alongside the country superstar Taylor Swift. It's all a big leap for a band that makes haunted, meticulous art-rock dense with vocal harmonies and folksy timbres, but Mr. Droste, sipping a homemade seltzer, was taking it in stride.

"I hate talking about career trajectories," he said, with a laugh. "I don't think any of us know what's ahead."

Since it leaked in full at the beginning of March, though, "Veckatimest" has pushed the band into new terrain. In a review posted soon afterward, the music blog Stereogum.com called the album "a game changer." KCRW-FM, the influential public radio station in Santa Monica, Calif., has been playing it for weeks. "I'm actually really trying to hold back," said Jason Bentley, the station's music director, and the host of its signature show. "It's one of my favorites of the year, hands down, and I've been cautious about overexposing it at this early stage."

Of course it's not the first album of its kind to generate this level of buzz recently. In January the experimental indie-rock band Animal Collective released "Merriweather Post Pavilion" (Domino), inciting speculation on Stereogum and elsewhere that it could be the best album of 2009. "Merriweather" has sold 97,000 copies since then, according to Nielsen SoundScan, a respectable number in a scene where 50,000 is considered a success, but the best-album claims have lost some steam.

With Grizzly Bear, whose previous album, "Yellow House," released in 2006, sold about 50,000 in part because of a tour with Radiohead last summer, the open question is what happens when that circle widens, and a potential breakthrough meets an entirely new set of standards. Priya Dewan, the label manager for Warp, based in Britain, which also released "Yellow House," said hopes for "Veckatimest" were running high. "We're projecting it to be our largest release in the U.S. ever," she said.

Mr. Droste, 30 — and his band mates, the guitarist Daniel Rossen, the drummer Christopher Bear and the bassist and multireedist Chris Taylor, all in their mid-20s —

profess little interest in the whirring machinery of public expectation. Their tendency is to call “Veckatimest” a creative advance, the truest expression yet of an evolving sound. But the headway and the hype aren’t unrelated: Grizzly Bear prizes mystery and intuition, and so do many of its earnest fans.

Over dinner at a restaurant in Williamsburg last month, the members of the band were happiest talking about the process behind “Veckatimest,” which was recorded at a few distinct locales, including a Brooklyn church and a house belonging to Mr. Droste’s family on Cape Cod. (The album’s title refers to an uninhabited island off the Cape.)

The conversation began with a round of cocktails — Old Fashioneds for everyone but Mr. Taylor, who had a gimlet — and talk about the band’s hermetic rituals. “We all really enjoy that isolation,” Mr. Taylor said, “and part of it is being out in nature, making a fire, recording, making cocktails, cooking dinner together, putting on Beyoncé.

All four members of Grizzly Bear live in Williamsburg, and their sensibility skews toward the artisanal and stylishly antiquated. Mr. Droste is the extrovert in the bunch, in a goofy and self-deprecating way; Mr. Rossen comes across as the wariest, spiking his language with qualifiers. Mr. Bear and Mr. Taylor share a dry sense of humor.

The new album was a thoroughly collaborative effort. Mr. Taylor, who serves as the band’s recording engineer, contributed structural as well as sonic ideas. Mr. Bear’s contribution went well beyond his fastidious but supple drumming. The aim was to capture the band’s cohesive live energy, even on tracks with additional flourishes, like a string quartet and girls’ choir orchestrated by the classical composer Nico Muhly.

The group was also seeking equilibrium between clean and murky, light and dark. “My role in producing is probably most focused on making sure there’s that tension,” Mr. Taylor said. “Because I hate it when things sound too sweet or too mean.”

Mr. Rossen, whose reverb-soaked guitar playing partly defines the sound of the band, chimed in. “We come from a background of being pensive,” he said. “This time around, one thing on everyone’s mind was being a little bit more optimistic, and tempering the moodiness, which can almost be a crutch.”

Whatever the motivation, the move toward brightness, concision and clarity can be understood as a pop impulse, especially for a band with this history. Grizzly Bear began as a vehicle for the bedroom ruminations of Mr. Droste, who comes from a classically inclined family but doesn’t read music. “Horn of Plenty” (Kanine), released in 2004, featured his multitracked vocals in a lo-fi haze, with sparse drumming by Mr. Bear.

Mr. Taylor and Mr. Rossen — former hall mates at New York University, which they attended at the same time as Mr. Bear — came aboard soon afterward. “Yellow House,” the first release by the full band, conveys a hushed, interior feeling despite the thick atmosphere in many of its songs. “Veckatimest” took more than a year to make, with the first songwriting sessions involving just Mr. Droste and Mr. Bear. (At the time Mr.

Rossen was making an album with his other group, Department of Eagles, which Mr. Taylor produced.) During one early brainstorming, Mr. Bear recalled, “We were listening to a very bad song, and we banged out a parody on the piano.” The joke turned serious as Mr. Droste devised an arresting new melody, complete with ethereal “whoas” and “ahs.” It became “Two Weeks,” the album’s summery but poignant lead single and its warmest burst of melody.

If Grizzly Bear has an outsider’s relationship to pop, it’s hardly an antagonistic one. “Knife,” the standout single from “Yellow House,” suggests a hallucinatory take on an early-1960s Phil Spector girl-group production; “He Hit Me (It Felt Like a Kiss),” which the band often covers in concert, actually has that pedigree. “Cheerleader,” from the new album, attests to similar influences, with an even dreamier feel.

The lyrics on “Veckatimest” — written by Mr. Droste and Mr. Rossen, sometimes in tandem — mine the terrain of personal relationships. On more than a few songs, the sunny vocal blend runs contrary to the brooding subject material, in the manner of a Brian Wilson reverie. “Ready, Able,” an especially bittersweet new song, begins with Mr. Droste singing this couplet: “I’m going to take a stab at this/Surely we’ll be alright.” His reassurance carries shadows of guilt and doubt, which gradually lengthen.

“When there’s this kind of romantic stuff, it’s not necessarily made up, but a little more impressionistic and stylized,” Mr. Rossen said. Mr. Droste added that it’s “deliberately vague.” Both lyricists characterized their writing as more artful than confessional, though the emotions explored are real.

“There’s something about their music that creates a personal connection,” said Mr. Bentley of KCRW. “People hold it close, they feel strongly about it, and that’s where the best form of promotion comes from.”

Last February Grizzly Bear performed a new song on KCRW, igniting a flurry of anticipation. (Spin magazine later hailed the tune, a catchy putdown called “While You Wait for the Others,” as one of the 20 best songs of 2008.) Months later on “Late Show With David Letterman” the band played “Two Weeks” publicly for the first time.

“It felt like bucking the system,” Mr. Rossen said; footage spread around the indie blogosphere. Similar excitement surrounded a recent concert with the Brooklyn Philharmonic, at which Grizzly Bear played more new material.

“With these newer songs,” Mr. Muhly, the evening’s arranger, said recently, “everything feels more sober and athletic and precise. The rhythmic footprint is more like a high heel than a hiking boot.”

The good will generated by the band’s staggered offerings helps explain why no one in the Grizzly Bear camp panicked when the album leaked online. Mr. Droste wrote a note on the band’s Web site, expressing dismay but no real pique. Warp chose not to move the

release date, Ms. Dewan said, “because the response we were getting was: ‘This sounds amazing. Can’t wait to hear the high-quality version.’ ”

Mr. Singh, the executive editor of Stereogum, said in an e-mail message that his opinions about “Veckatimest” haven’t changed since he wrote his early review. “It’s been a mix of bearing witness to the buzz and feeding it,” he said of the Web site’s coverage.

For their part the members of Grizzly Bear are doing their best to temper expectations. “I literally think it’s impossible for a band like us to get to the size of a band like Radiohead,” Mr. Droste said. “Not if we want to keep making the music that we’re making.”

And as the band draws closer to its biggest headlining tour yet — after two sold-out shows at Town Hall this week, it will roll on across the United States, with stops in Europe and Japan — no one claims to know the script.

“This feels like the clearest slate I’ve ever had,” Mr. Rossen said. “It’s exciting and it’s scary, in a way. This record is so promising, and I really love how it happened, and I’m really proud of it.” He paused. “And I really don’t know what we’re going to do after this.”