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ALBUM REVIEW

A Hawk and a Hacksaw

Délivrance

[Leaf; 2009]

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Rating: 7.8

The story of A Hawk and a Hacksaw is as captivating and multifarious as the duo's growing body of work. Having started out as the solo project of former Neutral Milk Hotel drummer and multi-instrumentalist Jeremy Barnes, AHAAH's extraordinarily beautiful self-titled debut album was recorded in the French countryside and released in 2002. Later travels in the Czech Republic inspired another recording before Barnes returned to his hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he met his paramour and collaborator, the highly talented violinist Heather Trost. A likeminded passion for music and adventure led the couple to spend extended periods of time in Hungary and Romania as they forged deep bonds with local musicians, capturing the magic of their interaction on an EP, 2007's *A Hawk and A Hacksaw and the Hun Hangár Ensemble*.

A Hawk and a Hacksaw's music has always been heavily inspired by the folk traditions of Eastern Europe, and their determination to integrate themselves into that region's culture and contemporary music scene has enabled them to continuously create absorbing and exciting songs. Since the duo are actively learning about the music they love from the artists who know it best, AHAAH's compositions always sound like they're moving forward and flourishing-- whereas a less musically courageous group could end up being a one trick pony. Their fourth album, *Délivrance*, is centered around Barnes' masterful tackling of percussion and accordion, Trost on violin, and a gaggle of Hungarian

specialists such as the trumpeter Ferenc Kovács and one of the world's foremost cimbalom virtuosos, Kálmán Balogh, who bring their animated musical personalities into the frame.

On past albums, AHAAH's klezmer and folk motifs have been anchored by a certain sorrow that was evident amid the exuberance, enticing the listener to experience a varied emotional flow. *Délivrance* is no less potent for being as effervescently high-spirited as it is. Even the lackadaisical drama of "Vasalisa Carries a Flaming Skull Through the Forest" feels drunkenly merry, like a casual, winding stroll through the trees after a night carousing on the cobblestones. If AHAAH were to have a "party" album, this would be it. Tracks such as "The Man Who Sold His Beard" and "Zibiciu" are foot-stomping reveries that sound as though they were composed in a smoky, crowded café on the banks of the Danube. So it's not surprising to hear that the band often kick started their improvisations with a shot of pálinka, a type of Hungarian fruit brandy.

As the group continues to draw inspiration from their travels and friends, they challenge themselves with baffling rhythmic tricks and collaborative ideas that fuse traditional melodies with their own distinguishing attributes. The gloriously sprightly energy of *Délivrance* is so ebullient and full of character that by the time it's over you feel like you've caught a glimpse of the type of joyful festivity that always feels most rewarding after a long journey.