

CD Review: Ben Folds/Nick Hornby — Lonely Avenue; Playing The Tabernacle, November 21

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[Ben Folds/Nick Hornby](#)

[Lonely Avenue](#)

[Nonesuch](#)

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If there is a rap against Ben Folds, the wildly talented pianist and songwriter, it is that he is too white. It is a flag he flies with pride in songs like “Rockin’ the Suburbs.” His characters are mostly slacker youths whose problems are akin to when Jan Brady had to wear her glasses to school. How white is Ben Folds? He produced a William Shatner CD. Instead of putting out a greatest hits CD, he put something out in which a capella groups sang his most popular songs. Yes, *a capella* groups. But you know what? Both the Shatner and the a capella CDs had a lot to offer. Folds is that good. He’s a man always willing to experiment. He produced Dresden Doll Amanda Palmer’s CD, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer?*, which had a delightful upbeat ditty about rape and abortion called [“Oasis.”](#)

So, in order to shed his white bread image, Fold calls upon . . . Nick Hornby? Hornby is a celebrated British author of classics such as *High Fidelity*, *About a Boy*, and *Juliet Naked*. Hornby is the king of what is known as lad lit. He writes books about guys who revel in their arrested development, but at least they all have fine taste in music. In short, Hornby’s characters read like fleshed out versions of Folds’ characters. They are slacker types with just enough personality that you root for them, or at least empathize a bit.

So the end result of having Folds write melodies to Hornby lyrics is just like listening to a straight-up Folds CD. But there’s nothing wrong with that. These are smart, wonderful songs that will leave the listener smiling, crying, or feeling disgusted, and they all have melodies that will linger long after listening.

The first two songs set the stage. “A Working Day” is about a writer feeling pretty good about himself. It includes superior lines such as “Some guy on the net thinks I suck/And he should know/He’s got his own blog.” But then the song undergoes a tempo shift from left field and the author begins actually questioning his talents “I’m a loser/I’m a poser,” he cries. Like any good Hornby story, it’s both hilarious and relatable; but here it is done in under two minutes, and with a Moog synthesizer.

It is followed by “Picture Window,” a gut wrenching ballad worthy of the same status as Folds’ [“Brick.”](#) It is a story of a woman dying in a hospital bed around New Year’s. It beautifully gets

to the heart of watching a loved one slowly wither away. In it, hope is referred to as a bastard, a liar, a cheat and a tease. And while the story is in no way political, one can be sure Obama will not be playing the song on his campaign trail.

The rest of the CD is just as strong. There are rants about a girlfriend's dog alongside a soulful homage to wheelchair-bound musician, Doc Pomus. There are sincere love songs, and also a story about a guy trying like hell to figure out his girlfriend's password. Then there's "Claire's Ninth," about a little girl trying to enjoy her birthday when her divorced parents arrive in two cars and try to make her understand why they are no longer together.

"Levi Johnston's Blues," about Bristol Palin's baby-daddy, seems at first like the only misfire. Hornby is above such easy targets, and the chorus, "I'm a fucking redneck, I like to hang out with the boys/Play some hockey, do some fishing, kill some moose," seem mean-spirited. But those lyrics were wholly taken from a Johnston Facebook entry that was quickly erased. And the melody is so infectious that you will have to monitor yourself from singing the curse-laden chorus in public.

In *Lonely Avenue*, both artists do what they do best. Hornby writes of relatable losers with both humor and pathos, and Folds wraps the lyrics with the perfect melody that evokes just the right emotion from the listener. This CD will not widen Folds' fan base in any way (most Hornby fans are already well aware of Folds), and does not force him to stretch as much as he may have hoped, but the pairing did result in completion of 11 almost perfect pop songs, and that ain't too shabby.

Ben Folds plays The Tabernacle on November 21.