

## ON RECORD

### A SAD AND BEAUTIFUL WORLD

ARI PICKER'S ODE TO HIS LATE MOTHER IS ONE OF RARE BEAUTY.

BY NICK ARGYRIOU

Such a complete record from beginning to end is North Carolina cinematic-folk rockers *Lost In The Trees*' newest release. It opens with the mood-piece 'Moment One' with its Bernard Herrmann-esque piano fragments melding into atmospheric studio sounds – a crushing of paper is heard then footsteps and then the chewing-up of a tape on an old movie reel.

On the band's second record, its writer and frontman Ari Picker dedicates the album to his mother, Karen Shelton, who, after years of trauma, took her own life in 2009. It happened just as Picker was to release the outfit's debut record, *All Alone In An Empty House*, and, even more shockingly, happened on the afternoon of his wedding day. An artist in her own right, Shelton lived a torturous existence that included the death at birth of her twin daughters, depression and then cancer. *A Church That Fits Our Needs* is Picker's ode to his beloved mother who just couldn't go on any longer.

Written during 2010 and midway into 2011, with Shelton's striking photo (discovered in an old film slide when cleaning out her apartment) sitting atop Picker's piano at home, the image wholeheartedly informed the writing process to the point where the record evolved into a conceptual piece. "Yeah, she looks immortal," says Picker. "She's equally strong and fragile so I just thought it really represented her experience and I began by using this photo as a jumping off point."

'Icy River' was the first song Picker wrote for the record and it laid the foundation for what needed to be achieved on album number two. "Writing helps with the grieving process and the purpose of the record was certainly to celebrate my mom and to honour her and create a space for her, like, build a monument so to speak," he explains. "It had to be beautiful and there's tragedy

in it and it's complex but ultimately it's supposed to be cathartic, revealing and positive." In retrospect, Picker does admit to placing a lot of pressure on himself early on in the process. "Well, like I said, I wanted to create a memorial to my mother and I figured that I only had one shot at it and it was certainly an important endeavour for me so I wanted to get it right," he affirms.

Admitting to "beating myself up more than I should have about it," Picker is now gratified that the intricacy of the record speaks for itself. His songs speak directly to his mother throughout – 'Red' was the colour of her hair as he romanticises about her life. She had 'Golden Eyelids' in a tune that documents her battles, from the twins passing to her cancer fight. 'Garden' is what she loved to do, and 'An Artist's Song' speaks of her work, while 'This Dead Bird Is Beautiful' tells the world not to believe she was weak. "Because she breathed, I breathed," he carols. All the time Shelton acted as Picker's light so he's conversing to her spirit through song. While it all sounds incredibly harrowing and could have been too-sad-for-words for some to pen, Picker approached the recording with a level head. He had to.

"There's a balancing act of not exploiting the drama; you want it to be pure," he says. Picker also has that innate ability to tell stories through instrumentation and not rely on the obvious nature of lyrics as much. He strikes a wonderful balance on *A Church That Fits*

*Our Needs*. Recorded and produced by Picker in North Carolina, the album was mixed by the ubiquitous Rob Schnapf (Dr. Dog, AA Bondy). And for the pair, chronicling soundscapes and creating atmosphere were key to crafting the true sonic feel of the LP. Picker even utilised field recordings and taped opera singers and a violinist down in a music college basement for added texture.

"A nine-piece string section was also involved and there was some stuff we liked from a crappy four-track recorder... I experimented at home a little too, so it was kind of a Frankenstein effort as far as where it was recorded and the quality of it," he explains. Wishing to elevate *Lost In The Trees*' new record from folk to grandiose, Picker, a classically trained composer, studied the works of Stravinsky and Mahler and modern day favourites Radiohead to further nail the brief. "More modern music influenced the bombastic string stuff and the quirky time signatures," he says. "I like the way Radiohead push themselves and I love that tenor voice to get some angelic, otherworldly textures happening too... or maybe I'd been listening to too much Pink Floyd or something," he laughs.



**A Church That Fits Our Needs is out now through Anti-Records. **

