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Fruit Bats: *Tripper*
 (Sub Pop)

"For Christ's sake, get these snakes off of me," begs Eric D. Johnson, the lead singer of Fruit Bats, on the first track of the veteran folk rock band's new LP. A reasonable request.

The paranoia continues, albeit against a snappy AM Gold beat, with "You're Too Weird" ("I'm the only one who ever believed in you"), as Johnson and company spin out the same twirls of melody on *Tripper* that made their past four records memorable. Keyboards become raconteurs, narrating a concept album based on a doom-tinged road trip through America: "Heart Like An Orange" wanders into pastoral Dylan territory, and "Wild Honey," a tribute to late Chicago-based

the world-weary troubadour manages to breathe life into her classically cautious compositions.

Already a notable presence on the London folk scene, Marling takes small steps forward as an instrumentalist, introducing a blue-note jazz opening to "I Was Just a Card," a surprising rock twist to Americana-stomper "Sophia," and a down-right gritty chorus to "The Beast" (a track far more believable than the faux-anger of "Rage"). Still, too many songs rely on the predictable pattern forged over the course of her catalogue. Whispered verses with solo guitar explode into a full-instrumental chorus, usually ending in some lyrical epiphany. It's all quite pretty, but also quite predictable.

Marling's saving grace is the eloquence in which she expresses emotion. "I know how you feel/I know it's not right, but it's real," she sings on "Don't Ask Me Why," splitting the difference between ennui and acceptance. From pondering her acceptance into heaven to her mother's curly hair, Marling's attention is so fully held (and in turn so captivating) it's difficult to believe other issues exist. While her music still belies her age, her laser-beam narrative focus still indicates a young adult willing to believe that *everything* matters. And under her masterful storytelling, for a moment it does. (www.lauramarling.com)

★★★★★ 7/10 By Laura Studarus