

The Milk Carton Kids - The Ash & Clay (2013)

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01. Hope of a Lifetime 02. Snake Eyes 03. Honey, Honey 04. Years Gone By 05. The Ash & Clay 06. Promised Land 07. The Jewel of June 08. Whisper in Her Ear 09. On the Mend 10. Heaven 11. Hear Them Loud 12. Memphis Kenneth Pattengale – guitar, vocals Joey Ryan – guitar, vocals

Ash & Clay, the second studio album from Los Angeles-based acoustic duo the Milk Carton Kids, offers up 12 no-frill slabs of vintage Greenwich Village-inspired folk that blend the close harmony singing of Simon & Garfunkel with the technical acumen of the Punch Brothers. A live staple at L.A. folk and comedy clubs, Kenneth Pattengale and Joey Ryan are known as much for their Smothers Brothers-esque banter as they are for their music, but Ash & Clay steers clear of any shenanigans, relying heavily on classic folk tropes like love ("Honey, Honey") heartbreak ("Years Gone By"), religion ("On the Mend"), and politics ("The Ash & the Clay"), effortlessly bandying about non-specific beatnik vernacular like a pair of well-read, mock-turtleneck-wearing, MacDougal Street time travelers. Stand-out cuts like the velvety waltz "Snake Eyes," with its parlor-gospel underpinnings and winking proclamation of "Slow, holy roller/It's just rock & roll," the wistful Gillian Welch/Avett Brothers-infused opener "Hope of a Lifetime," and "Memphis," an evocative, impossibly lonesome, last-smoke-of-the-evening meditation on Paul Simon's "Graceland" ("This ain't a trip with my son/there's no guitar shines in the sun"), succeed by invoking the duo's heroes without replicating their idiosyncrasies. In other instances, it's hard to hear Pattengale and Ryan's voices amidst all of the infrastructure, however austere. Songs like "Promised Land" and "Whisper in Her Ear," while undeniably beautiful and immaculately delivered, lack even the tiniest shard of originality, feeling more like outtakes from an Off-Broadway, folk revival-inspired musical than they do midnight emissions from an impassioned, rent-depleted singer/songwriter. That said, the album succeeds more often than it flounders, and even then, the singin' and pickin' is so good that it's hard not to submit, but one wishes that the pair had decided to infuse the collection with a bit more of their signature wit, as much of The Ash & Clay feels a bit like a serious Flight of the Conchords. --- James Christopher Monger, Rovi

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