

## Glenn Labs · *Best Laid Plans* · 2009

What separates the heart and mind? A question philosophers have struggled with for centuries, yet science always forces their hand. Let the navel-gazers do their best to talk it out, but in the end, it's in the laboratory that life's little secrets are revealed.

"I want to tickle the brain as well as the heart," says Brian Davis of the songs on *Best Laid Plans*, a beaker-full of pop hooks from San Francisco-based Glenn Labs. And while the balance of innovative song structures and crafty, genre-hopping arrangements certainly appeals to the analytical mind, *Best Laid Plans* is really about stimulating the limbic system. Emotions, memories, happiness, lack thereof...

Davis launched Glenn Labs after moving to the West Coast in 2005, ready for a fresh start after spending years playing guitar and mandolin with Chicago-based band The Floorbirds. "I started writing songs on a nylon string guitar, which opened up my head to hearing the instrument as if it were not a guitar – picking up sounds and intervals rather than familiar chord shapes," he says.

Eventually, Davis crossed paths with keyboardist Drew Baglino, who acted as a sounding board for the new songs while broadening the nascent band's sonic palette. "He's classically trained by a Russian psychopath," notes Davis, "and was able to unlock ideas implied by the nylon-string guitar in the rehearsal room." Baglino brought in bassist Mike Gubman and drummer Robby Bearman, rounding out Glenn Labs' lineup. After a year of rehearsals and gigs, the band began studio work on *Best Laid Plans* at San Francisco's Tiny Telephone, Closer Recording and Ruminator Audio.

The band's "Tin Pan Indie" style draws heavily from Sixties pop and soul, blended with a cut-up, shape-shifting aesthetic that favors forward movement over cyclical repetition. "I want to develop a cadence just long enough so that once you get hooked, I'll switch it up on you and really turn your head around," says Davis. "A lot of formulaic songwriters say, you don't do that, your song formats go A-A-B-A or whatever. I'm not trying to be inaccessible, but I think the A-to-Z format opens up a lot of possibilities for a longer form of expression."

Augmented by copious guests providing horns, strings, percussion and choir, Glenn Labs adds layers without toppling the cake – or taking away any of the sweetness. As meticulously constructed as it is, *Best Laid Plans* still leaves room for the musicians to groove comfortably, even with improvisational elements: The baroque-pop middle section of "I'm Losing You" gives way to a spirit-lifting solo, and "Alls I'm Saying" soars toward its final verse on the strength of several strata of keyboards and guitars. Meanwhile, "Dollar Bills" veers toward Bourbon Street funeral march in its cocktail-driven coda, and the pedal steel lullaby in "Stay Behind" hints at Midwestern alt-country stylings.

The arrangements, Davis says, were guided by his playful lyrics, which dictated moods and tones but weren't always meant to be central in the finished product. "Words can get in the way of communication," he says, "feel is a much more efficient medium in song."

What is it that brings the heart and mind together, then? For Glenn Labs, it's an exact science.