

# Mp3 Pyramid - The First American

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Pyramid is the sound of genres -- rock, country, classical, jazz -- being torn apart and reassembled into an organic whole. 14 MP3 Songs ROCK: Modern Rock, ROCK: Psychedelic Details: "The local octet finally put out their long-rumored (and awaited) full-length, The First American, and rest assured it was well worth the wait. Perhaps the most intricate and nuanced record ever by a Charlotte band, it'd sound equally at home on Touch and Go, Thrill Jockey or SubPop. Let's hope the suits are listening in those towns - they sure seem to be here." -Creative Loafing "Pyramid is the sound of genres -- rock, country, classical, jazz -- being torn apart and reassembled into an organic whole." -Tim Davis, Creative Loafing "Pyramid has released the first truly great album this reviewer has had the pleasure of experiencing this year... The sound and feel of The First American leads to some comparisons, most notably: the husky whispers of both Bright Eyes, and strangely, the Deftones; the ability to break down a musical arrangement and reassemble it in a junkyard a la Tom Waits or Radiohead, and the dark and dirty feel of the Southern gothic revival, courtesy of 16 Horsepower and Slim Cessna's Auto Club. But this reviewer would only mention these to give a frame of reference - Pyramid is entirely its own creation." -Lucas Walker, Left off the Dial "The eight-member ensemble embeds simple, acoustic folk songs into a complex sprawl of wind and stringed instruments, keyboards, squalling, dissonant feedback and shimmering silence. If this reads like some grand concept from Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, that's not far off base." -Mark Kemp, The Charlotte Observer "Pyramid has been on countless "Watch this Band" lists, but unlike many other recipients of such distinctions, Pyramid is actually deserving." -David Gaines, Performer Magazine "...the music, like most memorable recordings, transcends time and place. This is more than simply a great record; in its own way it can redefine how we hear music. And a record wielding that kind of power deserves our highest praise" Rating: 5 out of 5 -John Schacht, Creative Loafing "Like large-roster trailblazers such as Tindersticks and Lambchop, Pyramid knows that less is more until, that is, you're ready for more...those moments hit with the element of surprise and force of a Death Valley downpour." -Rick Cornell, The Music Monitor "Pyramid distinguishes itself through its elegance. The songs are full of understated Salingerian anguish, but also cut with uncommon sophistication...Athens is particularly lucky

to ingest its bracing, disciplined blend during the dour winter." -Emerson Dameron, Flagpole "A sonically beautiful record constructed the old-fashioned way, it's a full-length statement/challenge/dare that contains multitudes, forgoing the hotel-style "here today, gone tomorrow" hit aesthetic in favor of building a foundation for a long and promising artistic future." -Tim Davis, Creative Loafing "To truly appreciate them, you need to witness the experience in person. There are eight members, and they switch instruments so often that it'll leave you dizzy. I can't even accurately describe their sound. It's this powerful, organic, cathartic, burning noise. It's a captivating dirge." -Jason Erb, Left off the Dial

"Charlotte's Pyramid is earning its nascent reputation as one of this state's best, touring and recording as an eight-piece on a mission to take beautifully nostalgic numbers and convolute them with the moaning ghosts of vibrato guitar and ebb-and-flow rhythms. Imagine Jason Molina's Being There as Nigel Godrich twiddled Wilco's knobs, and call that a start." -Grayson Currin, The Independent Weekly "Pyramid, like the supernatural undercurrent implied by the name, is both an enigma and one hell of a thing to run into. If a landscape of cookie cutter pop-punk is our cynical desert, then we might be as stunned to find this band in front of us as the sleepy eyed camel driver who bumps suddenly and unexpectedly into a monolithic nose-less Sphinx." -Matt Reynolds, cItROCK.com "I can't even accurately describe their sound. It's this powerful, organic, cathartic, burning noise. It's a captivating dirge." -Jason Erb, Left off the Dial

Named one of 21 Bands to Watch in the Southeast by Creative Loafing: Formed in North Carolina in 1997, Pyramid was conceived as an outlet for musical experimentation. This approach led to many extended sessions holed up inside a small basement recording hours upon hours of sonic explorations - favoring improvisation over structure, intuition over formula. Gradually, the eight-piece band found itself returning to certain aspects of musical form and classic songwriting - maintaining a grasp on their more experimental leanings. Subverting and embracing tradition, Pyramid began to compose music with an eye toward playing live. In the summer of 2002, the band emerged from the basement with a slew of new material and took to the stage, garnering critical praise for their unique brand of music. Pyramid was voted Creative Loafing's Best Modern Rock/Indie Band in 2002, 2003, and 2004, as well as named one of '21 Bands to Watch in the Southeast'. They have spent the better part of two years recording their debut album *The First American* in their newly constructed studio. The album was self released on March 18th 2005. Their basic setup incorporates guitars, keys, alto, baritone sax, bass clarinet, clarinet, cello, violin, accordion, vocals, bass, and drums. Two of their songs are featured on the soundtrack to *All the Real*

Girls from Sony Pictures Classic (affording them the opportunity to play at the Sundance Film Festival) and another song found a home in the United Artists' film, *Undertow*. A review from Creative Loafing Charlotte by John Schacht: Pyramid *The First American* sidewalkexplosion We here at CL often refer to Pyramid as an "experimental" rock group, an easy pitfall given the octet's own anecdotes about late-night, chemically altered mad laboratory recording sessions and rather spontaneous live shows. But like all truly inspired recordings, the band's debut, *The First American*, forces listeners to re-examine their musical preconceptions. Because the most surprising aspect of *The First American* - a record chockfull of bewitching surprises - is not how avant garde or off-the-wall it is, but how organic and natural it sounds. Its strength begins with great songs. And the eight members (all multi-instrumentalists) deliver them with passion and chops, from the sinister insistence of "Digging to China" and claustrophobic paranoia of "Appalachian," to the summery buzz of "Adelaide" and chugging rock riffage of "Engineer." *The First American* is memorable also for its unique arrangements. Wind instruments and strings, rather than guitars or keyboards, not only provide accents but drive key passages in every song. Yet they never feel self-indulgent, never sacrifice melody or beat just for the shock value of a weird affect. The brick and mortar, as well as the bells and whistles, serve the song, never the other way around. And the music serves the lyrics, written primarily by Ben Best and Joey Stephens (they also share singing duties). Both prefer striking imagery to straight narratives, and lines like "there's something coming over me and I'm pointing out my enemies"(from "Appalachian") and "I'm rancid, I'm bad, man, I'm cancer in your mouth" (from "Digging to China") accurately reflect the minor key, tangibly Gothic feel of the record, the aural equivalent of rummaging through an old house and discovering a sinister but mesmerizing past. The final piece in the puzzle, and one that could have gutted the entire effort if mishandled, is pitch-perfect production. All those accents and instruments could have overwhelmed the songs. Instead, the production highlights their placement and distinct nature - from synthetic tape loops to organic reeds - without sacrificing the heart of the songs. It may be tempting to put *The First American* in a local context, but the music, like most memorable recordings, transcends time and place. This is more than simply a great record; in its own way it can redefine how we hear music. And a record wielding that kind of power deserves our highest praise. Rating: 5 out of 5 Review from The Charlotte Observer by Mark Kemp Much is made of Pyramid's improvised performances at area clubs, but it's the controlled chaos that makes this Charlotte group's debut album such a mind blower. This is no noodling jam-band. The eight-member

ensemble embeds simple, acoustic folk songs into a complex sprawl of wind and stringed instruments, keyboards, squalling, dissonant feedback and shimmering silence. If this reads like some grand concept from Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, that's not far off base. But "the First American" is more ambitious than "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" or "A Ghost is Born." Pyramid's music toys with the vocabulary of composition the way groups from the '80s Downtown New York dark ambient/jazz/noise scene did. But whereas artists such as Sonic Youth or John Zorn replicated the feel of a subway tunnel or Times Square at rush hour, Pyramid evokes the anxiety (rather than the freedom) of wide-open space. "The First American" works best when the words and sounds suggest a sense of place; its weakest when the affected, clenched vocals and ultra-bleak lyrics undermine the music. Over the duration of the album, Pyramid's dourness becomes a bit tedious. But the group is on to something big, and quality labels such as Nonesuch Records should be taking notes.

about the band: by John Schacht You don't have to be in a band to know that they are collaborative efforts, and you don't get any more collaborative than the local octet Pyramid. For almost a decade now the core group has been making experimental music together, pushing and pulling at the boundaries of traditional song structure, defying most of rock's sacred cows and the hallowed shibboleths of any other genre crossing their paths. For most of that decade, they did it for fun, a side-project not for publication, a lark, something for old friends, bandmates and fellow students to do the two or three times a year they got together. But then something odd happened. They got good at these improvisational get-togethers. People urged them to play out. On a whim, and when convenient, they'd book a gig or two. Friends were impressed. One of them was a filmmaker (David Gordon Green) with an upcoming feature film who wanted two of their songs for his soundtrack. Sure, why not, the band said, and lo and behold there was a major-label soundtrack - All The Real Girls - with their songs on it, right next to those of some of their own heroes, like Will Oldham and Mogwai. Suddenly, roughly two years ago, Pyramid was no longer a lark. This Friday at the Neighborhood Theatre sees the CD release party for their debut, a remarkably mature and organic, genre-defying full-length entitled The First American. "I was telling my parents, when I invited them to the release party, I said, 'This is it, this is the big night,'" said singer and guitarist Joey Stephens. "Certainly for the past two, three years everything has led up to this. But then way before that when we first started playing together nine years ago, it has basically led up to this." "It's been just under two years, really, which isn't fast, but it's not as horrible as it sounds to record that many songs since we went in there and said, 'Let's track it right,'" said reeds man Brent Bagwell. "But what he's

saying is right; a lot of it was built on when we would get together three times a year in the earlier years - and built on just knowing each other (for a long time)." "A lot of that was that we were just going to release an album and that would be it," drummer Chris Walldorf added. "We weren't necessarily going to tour, we were just a recording project - 'Let's just throw it out there and see what happens.'" But All the Real Girls and a song on the subsequent Green soundtrack for the movie Undertow (The First American album opener "Digging to China") created a momentum the band couldn't and wouldn't deny. Walldorf, a sound engineer, began building a custom-made studio. Band members formerly scattered from Athens to Seattle, High Point to New York City, began relocating to Charlotte and environs. The late-night improv sessions took on a more focused air. Hundreds of hours of tape were culled for interesting new recording techniques, inspiring melodies and new, challenging or uncharted instrumental combinations. Some of the results make up the 14 unorthodox songs heard on The First American. They were the chosen songs from among the 30 that the band recorded over the last two years, some of the rest of which are slated for EPs, 7-inch singles and b-sides, and the odd compilation or soundtrack. Throughout, each of the eight members - all of whom are multi-instrumentalist - took part in the band's rare collaborative process, which extends from ideas to final song selection and track listing. With the often elliptical and striking words and phrases of principal lyrics writers Stephens and Ben Best usually determining the mood, all eight members are free to contribute to songs - either via suggestions at practices or through recordings, no matter who the principal songwriter is. Ideas are hashed out, adopted or discarded in part by democratic means, and, of course, via powers of persuasion. Not only has no one been killed; they seem to genuinely like and respect each other. Egos get checked at the studio door, for the most part. "When you start learning a song it kind of sounds like a big cacophonous mess," Walldorf said. "But everybody self-edits: 'It sounds cool if I lay out here,' or, 'What if it's just the two of you here,' so it becomes like subtracting elements - a lot of pulling things out and trying to figure out what's the most interesting part going on. "I've certainly asked people to lay out, and I've been asked to lay out, and it doesn't bother me; I don't think it's because they think I'm a bad person." The band cites several key factors for their mostly laidback approach: having been friends pre-Pyramid in many cases; playing largely for their own edification for years without the pressures of record deals or lengthy tours; their own multi-instrumental talents; and a "song-first" commitment above all. "Speakeasy," a catchy minor-key march with different instrumentation for each verse and chorus, is one example of the band's collective approach. With all

eight members present, someone suggested an experiment the others found too good to pass up. With one player on Theremin, and another on keys, the other six were given effects to tweak the main instrument's sounds, simultaneously. "We did it over the course of the whole song," Bagwell said. "And then we just said, 'oh, that's great, and that's great, and that' - just little splashes here, and there - we wound up taking out 95 percent of it." "People probably listen to it and think 'overdub city,'" said Bagwell, "but the vast majority of it is just for all of us to set up take it just a couple times, maybe four, and it's there. Then we would do stuff with it later. Eight or nine tracks are in real time - a couple of times on "Monster" it was one pass, then all of us on other stuff on another pass, immediately after - so it's over-dubbed, but in a way that feels more spontaneous." A similar open-minded approach informs all of The First American. From someone grafting lyrics about the death of a loved pet onto someone else's formerly all-instrumental cut (and making it work), to two members simultaneously suggesting a New Orleans funeral march for the bridge of a country western roots song, and another musician transposing an entire song from guitar to horns virtually on the spot, Pyramid's versatility, chops, almost ego-less approach and a fundamental belief in experimenting has provided Charlotte one of its most intriguing bands.

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