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Last Town Chorus: Beautiful Woman of Steel

Because it's led by a lap-steel player (and a breathtakingly beautiful one at that), Megan Hickey's Last Town Chorus turns heads when it plays live. But even before Hickey spellbinds listeners with her blend of oceanic slide work and Gillian Welch-meets-Hope Sandoval voice, the sheer exclusivity of what you're seeing is enough to make you stop and gawk.

It's a notion that's not lost on Hickey: "Recently I've been seeing some video people have been taking of us, and it's almost been shocking to me, how it looks. It looks really f—ing weird." Playing an instrument that's associated with country and Hawaiian music—and almost never used as the dominant instrument in a group—is clearly proving an advantage for Hickey's four-year-old, Brooklyn-based band, the 30-year-old Pittsburgh native's very first group.

"Because it's unique," she says, "people can hear our music with more open ears than if they were to walk into a club and encounter a band playing acoustic guitar with an electric guitar and a bass, using 4/4 time and predictable song structures, or a girl with a guitar kind of thing."

That said, her use of a lap steel isn't a premeditated gimmick. In Spring 2001, Hickey was trying to get a band off the ground and was growing increasingly frustrated trying to write songs on piano and guitar. But when her then-partner in Last Town Chorus, Nat Guy, plugged in his lap steel, it was as if the clouds parted, the sky opened up and a gift fell from heaven. "That instrument ... was Pandora's



Box. I don't mean to over-dramatize it, but that's exactly what it was. I was like, 'Holy shit, this is the thing.'" Not long after, she convinced Guy to sell her the beat-up, roughly 60-year-old instrument (made by a Cleveland-based company called Oahu Music Publishing) for exactly what he paid for it—\$450.

It may prove the greatest bargain of her life, as the instrument has become endlessly inspiring while defining her delay-drenched sound. "It has a human voice; it's so visceral to me. It sounds like I feel." It unlocked the songs that fill Last Town Chorus' enchanting self-titled disc, songs laced with bittersweet themes of New York ("I feel like New York is sad and exciting at the very same time") and transplantation. "It's probably the same stuff that's gonna occupy my mind for the rest of my life: transplantation, heartbreak and bittersweetness." *Wes Orshoski* ●