The Rentals – Lost in Alphaville Review

**Score: 7.5**

**Album:** *Lost in Alphaville*

**Artist:** The Rentals

**Year:** 2014

**Genre:** Alternative

**Home page teaser (one sentence):** Moog practitioners return again after 15-year hiatus.

**Banner quote (from album):**  *Now we have all this technology to send apologies*

**SEO Tags:** Alternative,The Rentals,Matt Sharp,Polyvinyl,Rivers Cuomo,Weezer,Patrick Carney,Pinkerton,The Blue Album,Songs from the Black Hole,The Black Keys,Moog,Synth Pop,Ozma, Lucius,Lauren Chipman,The Section Quartet,D. Sardy

**Conclusive Review:**

Despite their vast differences, time apart and foggy views of the world, it’s still hard to mention Matt Sharp without at least a subtle nod to his former Weezer bandmate, Rivers Cuomo. So let’s get this out of the way, shall we? Rivers and Matt were once the best of buds, crafting the cleanest of heart-wrenching pop songs for the disgruntled youth of the mid 1990’s. They harmonized, rolled their twelve-sided dice and made two phenomenal records: *The Blue Album* and *Pinkerton.* Sharp’s contributions to these two staples are what many still consider the spark that kept Weezer a notch above what they’ve gradually devolved into.

Between these albums, Sharp also formed a little synth pop ensemble called The Rentals. Their debut, ironically titled *Return of the Rentals*, was a moderate success backed by the single “Friends of P.” If you haven’t heard this record, I suggest you dive deep into its ten tracks and see if you’re still that grumpy garage-ridden nerd after the fact. The Rentals, although considerably more new wave, still shared vast similarities with Cuomo and Co, from pop hooks to atmospheric lyrics. Lest we forget, *Pinkerton* was originally intended as a space-rock opera entitled *Songs from the Black Hole*. Break-ups, falling-outs, lawsuits and inevitable reunions followed, Sharp releasing one more album with The Rentals (1999’s considerably underrated *Seven More Minutes*) before going solo for a time, while most of us know what happened to Weezer, just ask the kid that used to beat you up in high school. He loves their last few albums.

*Lost in Alphaville* is Sharp’s considerable return to form, ten tracks of interstellar magnitude backed by a brand new bunch of astronauts. “*So now we have all this technology/to send apologies/that just swim inside out heads*,” he sings on “1000 Seasons,” one of the album’s more down-to-earth contributions. The blending of time and technological advancements has affected even those with their heads in the clouds, Sharp being no exception. Since 2005, he’s toyed with The Rentals in various forms, touring and releasing *The Last Little Life EP*. They’ve been pigeonholed as one of many 90’s bands bouncing back from the shadows of solo obscurity for a little taste of sweet nostalgia.

Whereas many of these Clinton-era acts haven’t bothered writing new material, or done so with little concern for their fans or critics, Sharp has hit the rarest of middle grounds on *Alphaville*. The residual spaciness from past Rentals’ efforts remain, and yet structurally, these songs branch out a bit, employing cavernous synths and a plethora of healthy noise bursts that often catch the listener off-guard. Don’t get me wrong, there’s a good bit of filler here as well, some of the tracks hinging too much on the starry-eyed dream worlds of yesteryear. At times, it’s hard to distinguish between them; Sharp employing surreal harmonics from his female compatriots, Lauren Chipman, Jess Wolfe, and Holly Laessig.

The gals and band are what really shine on *Alphaville*, taking Sharp’s every cue to concisely layer the necessary gravitas for his songs. The Rentals have always been a hodgepodge of different musicians, chiming in and changing when necessary. Past albums have featured the likes of sisters, Petra and Rachel Haden, not to mention SNL-alum Maya Rudolph and Weezer drummer, Patrick Wilson. Patrick Carney of the Black Keys does an admirable job, filling in this time around; his clangy contributions to the overall aesthetic a real treat when given the opportunity to shine. The same can be said of Ozma’s Ryen Slegr, matching Sharp’s guitar work, but never leading the entire ensemble overboard.

Past the gigantic swells of Moogs and vocoder crackles, *Lost in Alphaville* stands firm as Sharp’s latest manifesto. Lyrically, he treads similar water, but never makes the listener feel as if they’re being forced into it. These upbeat numbers are tragically authentic, catching minor glimpses of the past, but offering just the right dash of what’s to come. Back in the saddle, bruised, but not broken, Sharp rockets forward towards another unforeseen plateau. There are inklings of all the transitions in-between, and while we’d all enjoy the right jab at his former contemporaries, this isn’t a Lennon Vs. McCartney kind of situation. It’s already quite clear who landed on the moon first, while the runner-up can’t help but occasionally stare past his thick-frames into the telescope lens and shrug. Maybe there’s just a bit too much smog in Beverley Hills this time of year.

**Track-by-track reviews**

1. It’s Time to Come Home: A gradual rise in ambience before the drums call the listener forward. When the full band comes in, it’s everything The Rentals have always been. Moogs, distorted guitars, lush female background vocals and Sharp’s subtle croon. “*As the day sets into the sky/bottle rockets/mothers are calling/It’s time to come home*.” This track is ridden with remnants of summer, lyrically painting the dense area surrounding a traditional point of origin. The kids have been out all day, causing havoc, and yet much like the band, return to their roots at the proper time. *It’s Time to Come Home* sounds like an old friend you haven’t seen in years, but as the reminiscing begins, you quickly recall where things left off. 9.4/10
2. Traces of Our Tears: Upbeat from the first synthesizer, this track is a familiar blend of perfected pop and clever arranging. The planetary background noises never steer the listener away from a continual focal point. Quick, concise verses all about the love and the turmoil that follows; *Traces of Our Tears* is a stellar explosion from start to finish, leaving only colored spots on the back of the eyelashes after the lights go out. Very little is left once the three minutes are up, just outlines of where we all stood in the middle. – 9.8/10
3. Stardust: Remember the end of *The Breakfast Club* when Emilio Estevez sees Ally Sheedy for the first time after trading in her Goth club card for beauty pageant refugee? *Stardust* sounds like the polished *Love Theme* playing in the background. Brief, moody, and in many ways, as transparent as high school, this track hits all the right elements musically, but lacks a lyrical punch. While singing about dreamy, space women floating on clouds has worked for Sharp in the past, this particular time it could use just a little more oomph. – 5.6/10
4. 1000 Seasons: This track grooves on noise before Sharp readjusts to the changing weather patterns, packing his phrases together and delivering quite a wallop. “*One more summer/one more season/one more winter without a sound.”* The anticipation leading up to the chorus is all part of the fun, before another pragmatic verse sets the scene. Sharp sings of technology’s folly, how sending quick messages through satellites lacks the proper depth of something written, twice-scribbled, scratched out and reworked. It’s not the freshest of concepts, but one worth another thought in-between texts. 8.4/10
5. Damaris: Just bass and drums lead us into the planetarium. Chipman takes the lead, switching off lines with Sharp on the verses. It’s a real comfort to hear them separately for once, their individual intonations acting as the glue for all the follows. *Damaris* is most reminiscent of *Seven More Minutes*, sharing similar European misconceptions and repetitive choral quirks. Arrangement-wise, The Rentals coalesce, each member bringing their shtick to the foreground, while still leaving room for the others. The backwards outro is a nice shift, making the listener somewhat anxious for Side B. 8.0/10
6. Irrational Things: A simple piano paired with guitar feedback is soon trumped by the gradual layering of electric stings, and finally a signature synth solo. *Irrational Things* places The Rentals back home again, and yet everything’s been moved around, misplaced, and in some cases, buried underneath piles of dusty mementos. Sharp writes of a time when it was so much easier being illogical. He’s on the fence about whether that same love from then is present now. It’s a pleasant thought, although could benefit from a proper dose of reality. Harmonically, one could almost be convinced to the contrary, but something tells me there’s a lot we’re not saying 7.0/10
7. Thought of Sound: This cut is all about loving something that’s always been there. Sharp draws the rich comparison between sound and the same poetic space queen he’s been singing about since 1995. The results are a bit hollow. Where Brian Wilson could find peace in a train passing by or from the dog barks next door, it’s seems considerably more difficult for Sharp. He masters the pop hook, the enlightened chorus claiming we’re all free, but doesn’t go deep enough to make a real impression. Love the song; love the girl, but maybe keep the two separate every once in a while. 5.4/10
8. Song of Remembering: Considering all the callbacks to the past on this record, one would think *Song of Remembering* would somehow improve on what was already said. Instead, it restlessly follows the same example, from verse to syncopated chorus. Short lyrical bursts and electronic background melodies synch up, but don’t offer enough new tricks to remind us of why we liked the old ones so much. Don’t get me wrong, rocking to an equal level is admirable, but doesn’t always get the job done. 5.5/10
9. Seven Years: “*All this time second guessing/the one that sleeps by your side/all those nights not confessing the secret that lays in your mind.”* This is a relationship song, and unlike many others written before it, considerably specific and far sweeter. Those magic moments on *Seven More Minutes* last longer now, sticking around in the deep recesses, waiting for the right time to pop up again. Sharp is anything but bitter, perpetuating a grateful optimism and leading his crew out of the darkness for the right kind of shout-out. His toast stands firm between sentimental and loopy, all the things one expects from an old friend. 8.6/10
10. The Future: The longest track on *Alphaville* gradually propels us towards another mysterious cloud in the sky. The toned mix of voices and static blips create a mood unlike any other on the record. It’s like when a CD skips forward if only for a second, before returning to the very beginning again. In just that short amount of time, so many unstable particles come together and separate again. Sharp places himself in the subway tunnel, waiting, and dreaming endlessly. He’s older now, still a bit indecisive, but never remarks on his chosen mode of transportation. While some would say train, I’d prefer to think spaceship. It just fits him better. 8.1/10