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Reviews

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project. The songs are radio friendly and fully equipped with hooky choruses sung with a husky roots-rock voice. —LN

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### Casey Holford *Bad Spell, Good Spell*

Produced by Scott Mann

Twenty-three-year-old Casey Holford expresses his New York City life in catchy, complex guitar rhythms. He layers non-linear impressions over these architectural constructions with smooth, quicksilver vocals. Bred in the East Village "Anti-Folk" scene, where Erin Mckeown dubbed him "Feral Poet and Falsetto King," Casey's second release, *Bad Spell, Good Spell*, is establishing him as an East Coast force. It's stirred tough New York press, as well as listeners in high schools and coffeehouses. Songs like the topographical "On The Map" energize with indie charm, while "The Lovers" shows Holford's soulful, melancholy heart. Though *Bad Spell, Good Spell* falls under the "folk" category, Casey sits among rebels like Ani DiFranco or Dave Matthews, who kick and push genres into fresh and nameless territory. —AW

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## 88 VOICE CHOICES NOVEMBER

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**CASEY HOLFORD** Holford plays heartfelt folk songs that sometimes delve into Dave Matthews territory, but that more often possess an edgy and innovative quality that suggests a collaboration between Paul Simon and Mr. Craig Wedren, of the late, great Shudder To Think. With Butch Ross and Rebecca Hart. **Columbia University, Postcrypt Coffeehouse, at 9.** (Switzer)

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The Boston Globe

# Calendar choice

## Friday 5/9

**CASEY HOLFORD** Nine years ago, Holford was a 14-year-old hopeful on the Boston coffeehouse circuit. Now he's a New York-based performer celebrating the release of his second CD, "Bad Spell, Good Spell." Fellow NYC antifolk songwriter Jenn Lindsay will also perform.

■ 9 p.m. *Kendall Cafe, 233 Cardinal Medeiros Ave., Cambridge. \$7. 617-661-0993.*

# BOOG CITY

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## Casey's at Bat On the Cyclone With Antifolk's Holford

BY DAN FISHBACK

Casey Holford is our last, best hope for masculinity. Men wage imperial wars, rape, plunder, and fill New York City's open mics with banal songs of rage towards the women they ignore. The men of the world soliloquize. They rant. They spew. Then, there's Casey Holford.

Casey Holford listens. His new album, *All Young and Beautiful*, spares us the typical grammar of the American male singer-songwriter—the brooding inward, the ejaculations outward, the voiceless women with bodies transmogrified into “wonderlands”—vacant, cypher territories for the imperial imagination of Uncle Sam and his self-satisfied nephews. The dramatic situation of *All Young and Beautiful* is, like Holford himself, more modest, more down-to-earth, more real than your typical fare.

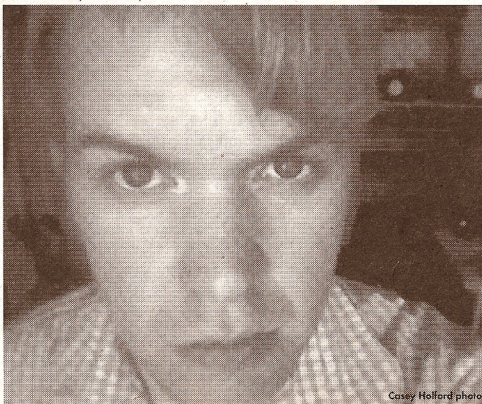
The voice of *All Young and Beautiful*, the character of these songs, does not impose his world view. He has no world view as the album begins. You watch as he forms it. You watch as he experiences the world around him, as he processes the mundane externalities of the everyday and comes out on the other side wiser, more textured, and more human.

In the wistful, rollicking “Moving Song” he’s at the mercy of his own possessions. “Junk” finds him attacked by form letters and mass emails, while with “Beard Song” his own facial hair alters his sense of self. The soul of this humble voice twists and turns around the ephemera of modern living, revealing more about humanity through its focus on the inhuman, the stuff, the crippling, crippling stuff.

“I guess it makes sense to me to deal with identity through the world of external objects,” says Holford, “because that’s

well! Wowwwwee-Kazowee! Oh, and DUDE, if you haven’t realized yet, I’m being sarcastic.”

Then I saw him play solo at a gay music event of all things (he isn’t by the way), and actually listened this time; to the guitar, not the voice, and when I closed my eyes, I could see the music in front of me. His strumming thrashed shapes in my mind, and his finger picking speckled those shapes with dots. After the show I told him his music was “geometrical” and his eyes widened, as if to say, “Totally.”



Casey Holford photo

It’s no surprise that Holford’s songs are so shapely. His first love wasn’t music, it was drawing.

shit, and that’s full of women. So I’m okay now.”

Just as Casey was sucked into these bands, I started to realize that he was the lyricist of my dreams. *Bad Spell*, *Good Spell* chemically fused with the plastic of my CD player, and I felt like the most jaded, idiotic man-hater ever to have had such a judgmental and prejudiced first impression of a man who, in all his apparent dudeness, writes songs like a feminist; with tenderness and skepticism, and without obliterating or colonizing the perspectives of others.

Meanwhile he was spending choice evenings in seclusion at the recording studio where he works, stewing up the new-wave/synth-folk masterpiece that is *All Young and Beautiful*.

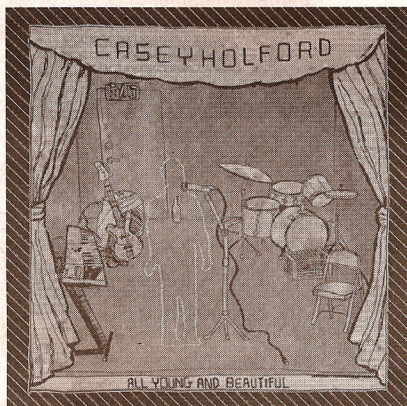
**Casey Holford is the missing link between lesbian folk, DC punk, '80s synth-pop, and classic rock. He's the link that makes them all seem like the same thing in the first place.**

“His songwriting has evolved from great to fantastic to nearly perfect,” says brother and keyboardist Matt Holford.

It begins with a 23-second song. It’s pure, condensed Casey—“Got some whiplash and my neck stiff/ Broke my sunglasses and got scared as shit/ Got a raw throat, and I got burnt by the sun/ On the cyclone, on the cyclone, on the

the most powerful way to express what's going on inside people. I used to be a big fan of [T.S. Eliot's] *The Waste Land*, [The Lovesong of Alfred J.] Prufrock, *Four Quartets*, etc. And Eliot used to hold forth that emotions were so much more powerfully expressed through description of objects than description of people."

Visit any New York open mic night and you'll find a whole class of people trying to "describe" themselves. Casey Holford describes a pile of junk mail, and the contours of his mind emerge in greater relief than the essence of your standard-issue



ingénue with the overpriced Gibson, sketching her emotional experience with clumsy adjectives.

Everything good about Casey Holford is so much the opposite of everything bad about nearly everyone else. And when you're so inundated with songwriters, as many of us are, a voice as fresh and honest as his cannot be exalted without tearing down his inferiors bloodily and with vengeance.

An imposing six feet, with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, a strong jaw, and piercing blue-green eyes, Casey Holford looks like a dude. When I first saw him perform, I dismissed him with the same anti-masculinist stance that I've shown so far here. It was 2003 and he was playing some pretty tasteful back-up guitar for folk singer Jenn Lindsay. I came to the show because I heard Jenn play some material about being a feminist, and being queer, and I was thinking, "What's with the dude? Oooh, look, a dude who plays guitar really well! Nice job, DUDE! Welcome to the world of DUDES who play guitar really

"When I went to art school [at the Rhode Island School of Design], I thought I would be an illustrator or a painter," says Holford. "Then I freaked and went into filmmaking. I got really into that for a couple of years, and definitely intended to find work in the field when I moved to New York, but the job market got horrible really quickly after September 11th, and I found myself temping at an investment bank, barely getting by.

"Doing very menial stuff, I pretty much couldn't help thinking of songs," says Holford. "I would think of entire melodies and instrumental parts in my head, away from instruments, and I would be writing lyrics endlessly in little snatches on Post-its in my cubicle. So my songwriting was a response to the recession in a perverse way—boredom and poverty gave me inspiration."

That poverty, and that inspiration, gave rise to the body of songs on his first full-length album, the calm, bright *Bad Spell, Good Spell*. It's the perfect "wise beyond his years" album, filled with insightful, passionate songs about being broke, getting by, and trudging through big city life with your soul intact. It's a mature album for immature people. And it's got music that unfolds before you.

"I kind of 'see' sounds in my head, represented as lines and textures and movement," says Holford. "I kind of beat my songs into shape so that they sound how I am looking at them in my head. I remember the first time I heard of the concept of synesthesia, it really resonated with me; seeing sounds, tasting colors. I think it's because that's how my senses work."

Holford's aesthetic instinct casts a wide net, from Patty Larkin to Minor Threat. Somewhere between these tastes, and between his two records, Holford was absorbed into two bands that sound nothing like any of those things, Urban Barnyard and Dream Bitches.

In Urban Barnyard, a semi-joke band that writes songs about animals in the city, he plays bass. "I don't think Casey even owned a bass at that point, but somehow he was still the greatest bass player ever," says Barnyard singer, guitarist, and drummer Phoebe Kreutz. "Maybe that's because he plays guitar kinda like it's a bass and a rhythm guitar and a solo guitar at the same time."

Holford's lead guitar in post-riot grl outfit Dream Bitches brings out the melodic wackiness in the songs of lead singer Yoko Kikuchi. Sans Holford, it's an all-girl band. "I've often felt that, as a big straight dude, I defaulted to outsider status in the world of women's music," he says. "But talented women like Erin McKeown showed me that doesn't have to be the case early on, and now I'm in a band I consider to be really hot

cyclone I had fun."

He's at the mercy of the elements, but he volunteered for the ride. He's battered, but he sees the beauty in his bruises. He assesses his state of injury, but then he looks outward.

More important than any lyrical interpretation or feminist analysis is this simple fact—*this album rocks like fuck*. As if Elliott Smith's *Figure 8* was twisted through the buttcrack of Cyndi Lauper's *She's So Unusual*.

Having performed but once with a 3-piece band, featuring members of psych punk band Pio Mazzotti and instrumental rock powerhouse Darediablo, Holford has only just begun to stage the unbridled rock that was previously constrained behind his massively chunky solo guitar arrangements.

It's a thrill to trace the line from Holford's consummate sweetness and modesty to the hugeness and dudeness of his rock bombast. It's a line that's walked every time you play his CD or watch him perform. Casey Holford is the missing link between lesbian folk, DC punk, '80s synth-pop, and classic rock. He's the link that makes them all seem like the same thing in the first place, and in the fragmentary, disjointed world that Holford laments in his songs, that's a good thing.

For more information please visit [www.caseyholford.com](http://www.caseyholford.com)

Performance artist, singer, songwriter, and general gadfly to the cognoscenti, Dan Fishback leads the band *Cheese on Bread* and performs throughout New York and further parts unknown.

**Michael Carr**  
Cambridge, Mass.  
**Bust and apparition**

Her babyface tylenol misbegotten  
trivial principles of referral won't appreciate  
deaconess mint. The yellow pages now was my  
second choice

exposed to street  
on the balcony's partitions they open  
themselves but with goodwill  
that's the awful truth, the entire  
time I thought I was living a normal life



reviews

## casey holford

all young and beautiful • self-released • 2005



Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter **Casey Holford** is an embodiment of the DIY spirit in action. Apart from a few friends and guests who make vocal and musical contributions, Holford wrote, performed, and recorded this album on his own using after-hours time at the recording studio where he works. It sounds like Holford brought lo-fi home recording techniques into the studio, resulting in a raw, sometimes overdriven sound that suits the immediacy of the songs. Holford's songwriting is folk-based, and his self-taught guitar style is rhythmic and energetic. The electric-based songs, like disc highlights "Neon Shining Star" or "Summer Storm," are a blend of rhythmic punky energy and 80s pop-rock sounds, and sound as though Holford is influenced equally by **Ted Leo** and **Rick Springfield**. The 80s quality is

reinforced by New Wave keyboard parts on certain songs, courtesy of Holford's brother Matt. Holford's folk roots show most strongly on the final two tracks, "That Song" and "New Year"; acoustic 12-string guitar figures prominently in both, and the former song even features what sounds like mandolin.

The album art includes a montage of cell-phone camera snapshots, a kind of visual preview of the lyrical style to be found in the songs. Holford writes the kind of earnest, autobiographical lyrics you might expect to hear at open-mic night at the coffeehouse, sometimes seeking greater meaning in slice-of-life subject matter, from the significant, like "Moving Song," to the trivial, like the unsolicited solicitations of "Junk." There's some welcome humor as well, though, such as "Beard Song." Holford's vocals are strong, and he harmonizes nicely on a couple of tracks with guests Yoko Kikuchi and Ann Zakaluk of **Dream Bitches**, for whom Holford also plays guitar. Stepping out into the spotlight on his own here, Holford really shines as a musician and songwriter, producing a strong and vibrant batch of songs. ([mike.03.06](#))



### CD REVIEW: Casey Holford – "bad spell good spell"

By [Stacey Board](#) - 01/18/2003 - 02:00 AM EST



**Artist:** Casey Holford

**Album:** "bad spell good spell"

**CD Review:** If Liz Phair woke up one morning, stretched, and pulled a little brother from her third rib, this would be him. And that is high high praise from me, do not be misled.

Like Liz, the rhythms and melodies are full of surprises but completely sneak in your head and stick there. The lyrics can knock you flat without your ever seeing the windup. Lastly like Liz, his singing is not decorated or prettied up in any way. What he sings is what you get. And what you get I really liked.

This CD has a pleasing low-fi attitude and many playful touches. There's an intelligence and enthusiasm here that I found impossible to resist. Casey is clever without being obnoxious, intriguing without being impossibly cute, complex and completely inviting at the same time.

What I find as his greatest strength is his surprising and unpredictable lyric imagery. He did not rhyme "light" with "night" or "tight" even once. Anywhere. One of my favorite lines is on "tickets to the show" where he sings "Cause I figure I could work out as a clown/Wear the red nose around town and breathe some funnier air".

The whole CD is sweet, jangly, intelligent and playful. I highly recommend all pop lovers give this a listen.

<http://www.cdbaby.com/holford1>

<http://www.caseyholford.com>

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## Music from the margins

*New York antifolkers seek some well-deserved public approval*

BY JOHN CHANDLER

*The Portland Tribune, Apr 11, 2003*

For every musical movement that is considered newsworthy, there are countless musicians who end up getting shut out. Perhaps they aren't particularly photogenic, or their music is too complicated to explain in 25 words or less. Yet often it's those artists who feel marginalized by both culture and society who make the boldest sounds.

Casey Holford is a singer-songwriter from the East Village in New York City and a card-carrying member of the antifolk scene, a movement spawned in the mid-'80s by younger musicians frustrated with the growing complacency among owners of New York folk clubs. Few venues were willing to take on these scruffy lads and lasses singing aggressively personal and political songs. Instead, the gigs went to old-guard singers rehashing tired folk standards. Among the shutouts were the likes of Ani DiFranco, Shawn Colvin and Roger Manning.

"I think antifolk, sort of like the larger punk ethos, has a kind of musical dissent to it that attracts people who are sick of being told what to like," Holford says. "If punk is about asking 'why' at all important junctions in one's creative, social, political life, then antifolk is about asking why songs Ñ not just folk songs Ñ have to be slick and neat in order to be worthwhile."

Holford is the point man for the "Public Approval Tour," a rambling caravan of antifolk barnstormers heading to Portland. In addition to taking on the logistics of booking gigs and dealing with club owners and the press, Holford is an artist who has gotten used to being on the outside looking in, staring in disbelief at the state of music gone haywire.



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“Musicians growing up in this country have to deal with the issue of finding roots for their entire lives,” he says. “We get plopped down into this conglomerate entertainment culture where every song É sounds down either a little or a lot like the one before it.

“I think the difference between folk now and folk before the birth of the rock-star archetype is that now folk is seen as a genre that any garage band can slip into by doing ‘MTV Unplugged,’” Holford continues. “Before, folk music was a way of communication. It was a way to hear stories, to pass them along, to gather together and be connected. É The history of the folk tradition humbles me.”

Touring with Holford, who writes and performs songs that describe his ongoing search for things of value and permanence in a society he sees as rapidly decaying, are three women artists, each bearing gifts lively and unique. Jenn Lindsay is a firebrand folkie, singing songs such as “I’m Not Going Home Yet,” a bulldozer of a tune that in rapid-fire lyrical fashion paints a tough-as-nails picture of living in the shadow of poverty in New York City.

Robin Aigner has a bit of the cowboy troubadour in her. Though draped in traditional folk style, Aigner’s outlaw songs about her family, friends and lovers are thoroughly modern and intimate.

Described as the love child of Joan Baez and Weird Al Yankovic, Phoebe Kreutz “is the closest thing we have to a stand-up act,” Holford says. “She’s really startlingly funny, because her writing is straight from the everyday, whether she’s singing about wanting to be a viking or scolding you for peeing in her pool.” Kreutz also has a marvelous song called “Taco Bell,” about falling for a fast-food employee and winding up with a sour stomach instead of a broken heart.

The “Public Approval Tour” is a low-rent affair, and the featured artists struggle mightily to put out records and gain an audience. MP3s and Internet radio have helped their cause, but for the most part Holford and his friends live pretty close to the bone. Even so, they remain optimistic that music and culture are showing signs of opening up its doors to them.

“It would be amazing if more people caught on and reached out for independent music, but I think the outlook is good, because you know it’s happening all the time, all over the place,” Holford says. “Folks buying an indie record online just don’t make as much noise as the companies who take out full-page ads in Billboard.

“It seems to me that the real change will come from people deciding to turn off the new adult contemporary chart-topper and look for something more satisfying.”

Contact John Chandler at [jchandler@portlandtribune.com](mailto:jchandler@portlandtribune.com).

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