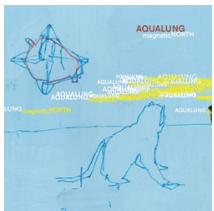


## REVIEWS

## AQUALUNG

**Magnetic North**

[Verve Music Group]

It's not surprising that Aqualung leader Matt Hales' career was kickstarted by a song featured in a Volkswagen television ad. A purveyor of lightly orchestrated piano pop, the Brit-turned-Californian makes populist music that goes down easy and runs determinedly forward. Nothing wrong with that, mind you, but Hale's yearning falsetto and tinkly melodies—on full display on *Magnetic North*—are flavored with more saccharin than substance. Divided evenly between bouncy, uptempo ditties (“New Friend,” “Fingertip”) and somnolent, lumbering ballads (“Sundowning,” “Remember”), the album casts Hale as a two-trick pony. Music fans of a certain age will be reminded of Eric Carmen's solo work, while the younger set might be put in mind of Five for Fighting's John Ondrasik. The sole exception is “California,” a Coldplay-style ballad fitted with cathedral piano, strummed guitar, and a vocal that ratchets down the cloying drama for at least its frustratingly brief minute-and-a-half running time.

—Russell Hall

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