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## MUSIC: FEATURE

### Death Cab for Cutie



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The sound of settling: Death Cab for Cutie (from left): Jason McGerr, Chris Walla, Nick Harmer, Ben Gibbard

### Fare hike

By [Omar Perez](#)

Published 10/30/2003

Death Cab for Cutie is known for being fiercely independent-minded and very DIY. But they were living up to the tag a little too much this Saturday evening, when they were forced to install their own lighting setup at a Virginia gig.

"This will be a whole new level of doing it yourself," bassist Nick Harmer offered, hoping that the inept booking wouldn't force the band to charge its own cover at the door, too. "It's like, 'Here's your shit. You guys figure it out.'"

Similarly, the Bellingham, Wash., emo quartet (Harmer, vocalist/guitarist Ben Gibbard, guitarist Chris Walla and drummer Jason McGerr) has worked around limited means and lack of name recognition and managed to emerge as one of indie rock's more notable under-the-radar acts. Their latest offering, "Transatlanticism," is likely to open a new chapter for the band. The record is being heralded as their best effort to date, with pop flair coming down dark on tracks like "Lightness" and "Expo '86," where Gibbard throws out nuggets of negativity ("I am waiting for something to go wrong/ I am waiting for familiar resolve"). But DCFC doesn't limit itself to wallowing in a sea of melodrama, as evidenced in the uptempo pop charm of "The Sound of Settling" and the Anglo-isms of "Tiny Vessels."

Gibbard formed DCFC in 1997 (the post-grunge recovery era) when he needed to put together a live band to perform solo material, picking up help from Walla, Harmer and one-time drummer Nathan Good. After a handful of area shows, the group released its debut, "Something About Airplanes," the following year. By early 1999, the band went from being relative unknowns to being considered one of the more promising acts in the Northwest, earning comparisons to Built to Spill and Elliott Smith. The national masses slowly caught on around the time Death Cab released "We Have the Facts and We're Voting Yes" and "Forbidden Love" in 2000, both of which sneaked into best-of-year lists in publications including *The Washington Post* and *Spin*.

Still, the band barely had a pot to piss in. Faced with mounting school loans, Good quit the band in 2000 to recover financially and was replaced by Michael Schorr, who was eventually replaced by McGerr (with whom Harmer had performed earlier in another band).

The band's next offering, "The Photo Album," wound up selling more than 30,000 units -- a small but impressive number, given the limited means of the small Barsuk label and little more than a word-of-mouth reputation from indie kids across the country.

"We had a number of years where we were struggling financially," Harmer says. "So it's been nice that things have been settling in the last couple of years, and that we can make better [money] than we've been doing."

Last year the band released "You Can Play These Songs With Chords," a rerelease of Gibbard's solo material written in late 1996, and spent most of the time on the road promoting "The Photo Album," keeping quiet about the works-in-progress that would later become "Transatlanticism."

"Before we did 'The Photo Album,' we toured playing the songs for almost a year before we committed [to them] and recorded them," Harmer explains. "Then we had to go out and do two more tours off that material, and when it was time to tour for 'The Photo Album,' we were kind of tired of the songs."

If the band's history predicts accurately, it's not likely that "Transatlanticism" will launch Death Cab into stardom. Rather, it will solidify its career, one that hasn't run its course in peaks and valleys but has maintained a steady upward spiral due in no small part to consistent, relevant songwriting and a loyal fan base.

"It's been a slow road into this," Harmer says. "We're definitely not a band that's been hyped right out of the gate. It's been a slow, word-of-mouth crawl. I never really believed in the overnight success story."