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The Autumn Stones' ESCAPISTS (2015) is your summer holiday

 [June 29, 2015](#)  [Valerie Polichar](#)

Smooth and suave, **The Autumn Stones'** sophomore release is the perfect summer soundtrack – with a bite. Behind the sexy vocals and simmering saxophone that evoke a dreamy world-as-it-might-be stand taut, no-bullshit lyrics about the world as it is. The combination is a cocktail worth a long drink. Good thing, because you won't be able to get these songs out of your head any time soon.

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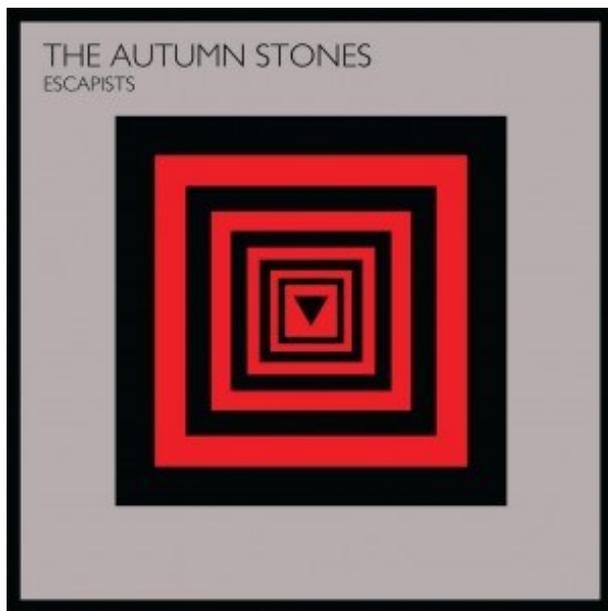
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The Autumn Stones first made a stir with their 2011 album, *Companions of the Flame*. Although regulars on the Toronto live music scene, they've released in the interim years just three tempting singles from *Escapists*.

The standout among these, "In With the Out Crowd," is as infectious as Aztec Camera's 1983 toe-tapper "Oblivious" — but lyrically edgier. "You used to speak freely," Ciaran Megahey (vocalist, guitars/vibraphone, songwriter) warns. "But now you feed the beast." Contrast between dark lyrics and bright music is a trick The Smiths popularized and The Autumn Stones embrace. A pattering bass riff (skilled work by Michael K. Newton) and exuberant horns (Gary Butler on sax) make this track as danceable as it is dangerous.

Another single, "End of Faith," has been re-recorded for the album. Where the original embraced the psychedelic murk of The Smiths' "How Soon is Now," the new version lets in (just a little) air and light, separating and clarifying each instrument's contribution and better matching the feel of the album.

It's perhaps unsurprising that Megahey's voice is often compared to that of Morrissey. Similarities in vocal range and timbre notwithstanding, Megahey's emotional range is arguably greater. On *Escapists* he persuasively runs the gamut from the sultry to the political.



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Megahey's contributions are powerful, the band is no one-man show. Butler's sophisticated horns fill the role of a second vocalist. In addition to a strong foundation from bass player Newton (since ably replaced by Marcus Tamm), percussionist Matthew McLaughlin shows off a broad portfolio of sounds, from the restrained soft-shoe of "Sweet Libertine" to the snappy beat of "In With the Out Crowd." Guest artists (like Blake Enemark of Snoqualmie, bringing sweet pedal steel drifts to "Libertine") have been carefully chosen. The balance of talent is part of what elevates The Autumn Stones above the pack.

If it seems like the '80s have cast a long (shall we say autumnal?) shadow over *Escapists*, there's no denying their influence on The Autumn Stones' sound. But the message here is more complex and nuanced. *Escapists* takes on such controversial topics as atheism, religious extremism, and modern war. Even the crooners here aren't straightforward: is "Sweet Libertine" a paean to sexual freedom, or a critique? Are the *Escapists* of "Ooh La La" in love, or are they hiding from reality?

The band took their time over their second album, and it shows. Polished and carefully paced, *Escapists* was engineered and mixed by Dean Marino (Echo Valley Studio) and mastered by Noah Mintz (The National, The Dying Arts, etc.). The attention to detail and quality pays off in listenability; *Escapists* is structured as the perfect wave for aural surfing. Just as the harmonies of "Sweet Libertine" reach their confectionary peak, the fierce strings (Hannah Morgan of Rumour Cubes in a brilliant turn) and

military tattoo (McLaughlin pulling out all the stops on drums) of "Spirit Shadows" fire up like an afterburner. "I lie uncrucified," Megahey declares, surrounded by a curtain of beautiful noise that culminates in a rocket launch.

That dense cacophony is followed by silky sax and a throb of Beach Boys guitar as "Ooh La La" takes flight. Megahey's sizzling voice and Butler's varied and eloquent sax riffs on the line "See the way we shine" seduce. "Ooh La La" rolls smoothly into the subsequent track, the equally beautiful, stirring "Creatures," featuring lush backup vocals from Claire Megahey.

But lest we be lulled too deeply, throbbing bass, defined drums, and a trumpeting sax solo at the 3:50 mark wake us, give shape and arc to the piece. Catchy it may be – but The Autumn Stones are not about to get caught in a predictable-pop trap. They'll escape it every time.

Unappreciated Scholars Review Grade: A

Escapists is available on [iTunes](#) and [Bandcamp](#). Follow The Autumn Stones on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/TheAutumnStones>. Visit the official website at <http://theautumnstones.com/>

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