

## Band of the Week: Beirut

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Monday 28 March 2011

### #21: Beirut



**Who:** Zach Condon.

**When:** 2000's-Present.

**Where:** USA.

**Why:** [Beirut](#), along with being the capital of [Lebanon](#), is also the name of a musical project that is perhaps the most persuasive advertisement for gap year travelling available. Originally, and still principally, the solo venture of Albuquerque native Zach Condon (yes, giggle giggle, it sounds like [condom](#), something you put on your willy), Beirut grew from comprising of the bedroom recordings of a high school dropout to becoming an international indie phenomenon, to the point where they're supporting [Arcade Fire](#) at [Hyde Park](#) this summer. Condon left education at 16, cantering around Europe on a musical sojourn that saw him soak up the music of the Balkans, from traditional folk to ragged Gypsy tunes. Reconfiguring these sounds into the context of the music he grew up on – his vocal traits owe a lot to Stephen Merritt of [the Magnetic Fields](#), for example – he was assisted by ex-[Neutral Milk Hotel](#) man Jeremy Barnes, under whose mentoring he began to create his 2006 debut, *Gulag Orkestar*.

With the backing of Barnes' new band [Hawk and a Hacksaw](#), Condon played a prodigious array of instruments, from accordion to saxophone, clarinet to ukulele, mandolin to glockenspiel. Signing to [Ba Da Bing!](#) after giving them an early sketch of the LP, it was released to wide acclaim, sending Condon soaring into prominence in the field of American independent music, and garnering him comparisons to everyone

from [Sufjan Stevens](#) to [Conor Oberst](#). It was on sophomore record *The Flying Club Cup* that Beirut reached their full potential, Condon now accompanied by a variety of orbiting musicians. The songwriting had flowered, each evocative tune redolent of another French city, bar 'Guyamas Sonora', a town in Mexico. On a bare framework of Neutral Milk Hotel-style indie folk, the band builds a unique Euro-American soundworld with euphoniums, flugelhorn, melodicas and bouzoukis. 'Nantes' is a mourning, moving paean to a love affair falling apart, while 'A Sunday Smile' captures the roving European atmospheres that Condon sought to replicate perfectly. A friend staying in Paris last November said she heard a busker playing it on the street – confirmation of its beguiling authenticity.

Filled with samples from obscure French cinema and conjuring a romantic, misty-eyed vision of a travelling life in the country, the record was lavished with acclaim, sending the band on a vast tour, cut short due to Zach suffering from exhaustion. Since then, the band have appeared on the *Dark Was The Night* compilation along with the brightest lights of US indie, and fiddled around with electronic side-project [Realpeople](#) (Oberst moment, anyone?) They've also inspired an entire genre of music in Brazil, where their zealous fanbase (thanks in part to an appearance on 'Capitu') have used their 'cavacoleles' (modified [cavaquinhos](#)) to create 'Beirutando', a fusion of Brazilian rhythms with Beirut's instrumentation. Not many indie bands can lay claim to something like that. With a new LP supposedly on the way, the Hyde Park date this summer should confirm Beirut as one of the last decade's most captivating bands; the world conjured by their sound so meticulously carved and enchanting that it's pretty hopeless to give in.

**Influences:** Neutral Milk Hotel, Magnetic Fields, Jacques Brel, Fanfare Ciocărlia, Kocani Orkestar.

**Influenced:** Noah & the Whale, Mumford & Sons, Tristram, Mariner's Children, Beirutando.

**Sample Lyric:** 'Well it's been a long time, long time now / Since I've seen you smile'.

**Which Record:** *The Flying Club Cup* (4AD, 2007)



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