

Margot & the Nuclear So & So's Glasvegas Smoking Popes Ben Kweller The Veils Moth!Fight!

# SOUNDCHECK

connecting the artist and the audience



## MY MORNING JACKET



TV on the Radio  
Man Man  
Girl Talk  
The Walkmen  
Fleet Foxes

Winter 2008  
ISSUE 20

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Honus Honus of Man Man performs at the Austin City Limits Music Festival  
photo by Randy Cremean

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## 2008: The Music That Will Bring Us Back

When we first considered dedicating this issue to the artists who most profoundly affected each of us within the Soundcheck family, we experienced some healthy debate: Do we really want to walk the path of the themed issue? Is it fair to categorize, and potentially objectify, the music and the artists of 2008? Eventually, one of us made the first list. Then another was submitted. Then we started really getting into it. Turns out, it was not only an enjoyable exercise, but it also told us something important about who we are, as a magazine.

What we discovered was that we have stayed true to our original intent: covering music that we like. Our lists are evidence that we have not strayed from that mission. We have published content for every single artist that appears in our 2008 lists. Many have been featured in this issue, but they all have been covered within our pages this year.

The significance of the artists and music found in our lists extends far beyond titles such as "Best Concert" or "Newcomer of the Year." The titles certainly carry much weight among our staff, but what we are really saying is that these artists are the ones whom we will never forget. My Morning Jacket and Fleet Foxes are timeless bands. Their music could have been released 30 years ago or could be released 30 years from now. I suspect one of the best ways that an artist can achieve such a status is by remaining true to themselves. As Jim James told Elliot Cole in his interview (p. 49), "So the most important thing is that we're happy with it, and we feel like it stands on its own two feet and we can live with it."

It is music such as this that plants its seed deep within our collective consciousness, waiting for optimal moments to bear emotional fruit. Years from now, we all can look back on the year defined by worldwide economic disaster, the perpetuation of a tragic war, and the unprecedented progress and determination of the people who elected Barack Obama. Music has a way of recalling memories, emotions, and visions. This issue is about the music that will bring us back – back to one of the most historically significant years our world has witnessed.

**Michael Marshall**  
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Soundcheck is dedicated to offering artists a vehicle to promote their music to audiences, as well as providing a thorough and objective source of information for music fans. In an effort to keep the content fresh and original, Soundcheck actively seeks creative contribution from new writers, photographers and graphic artists.

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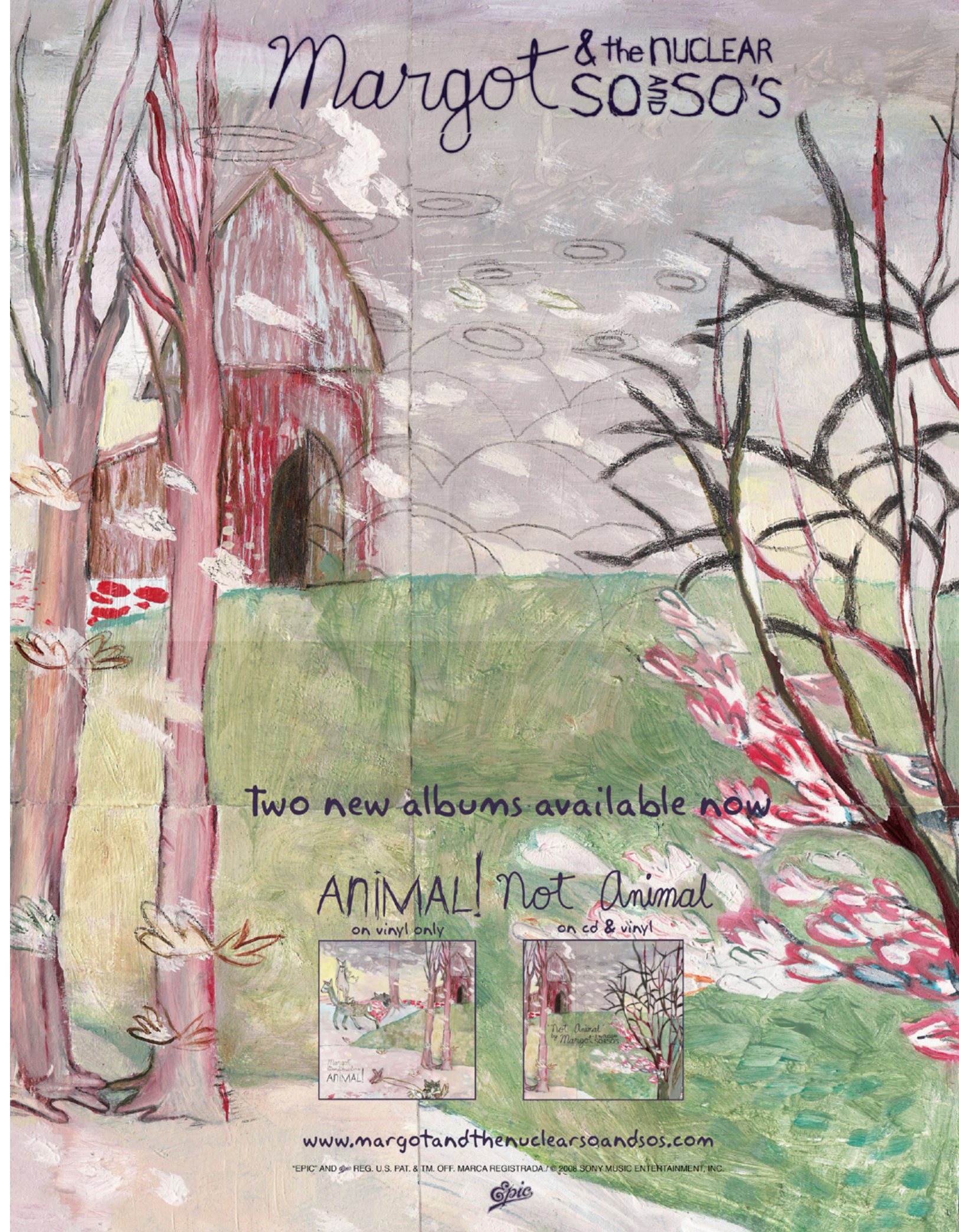
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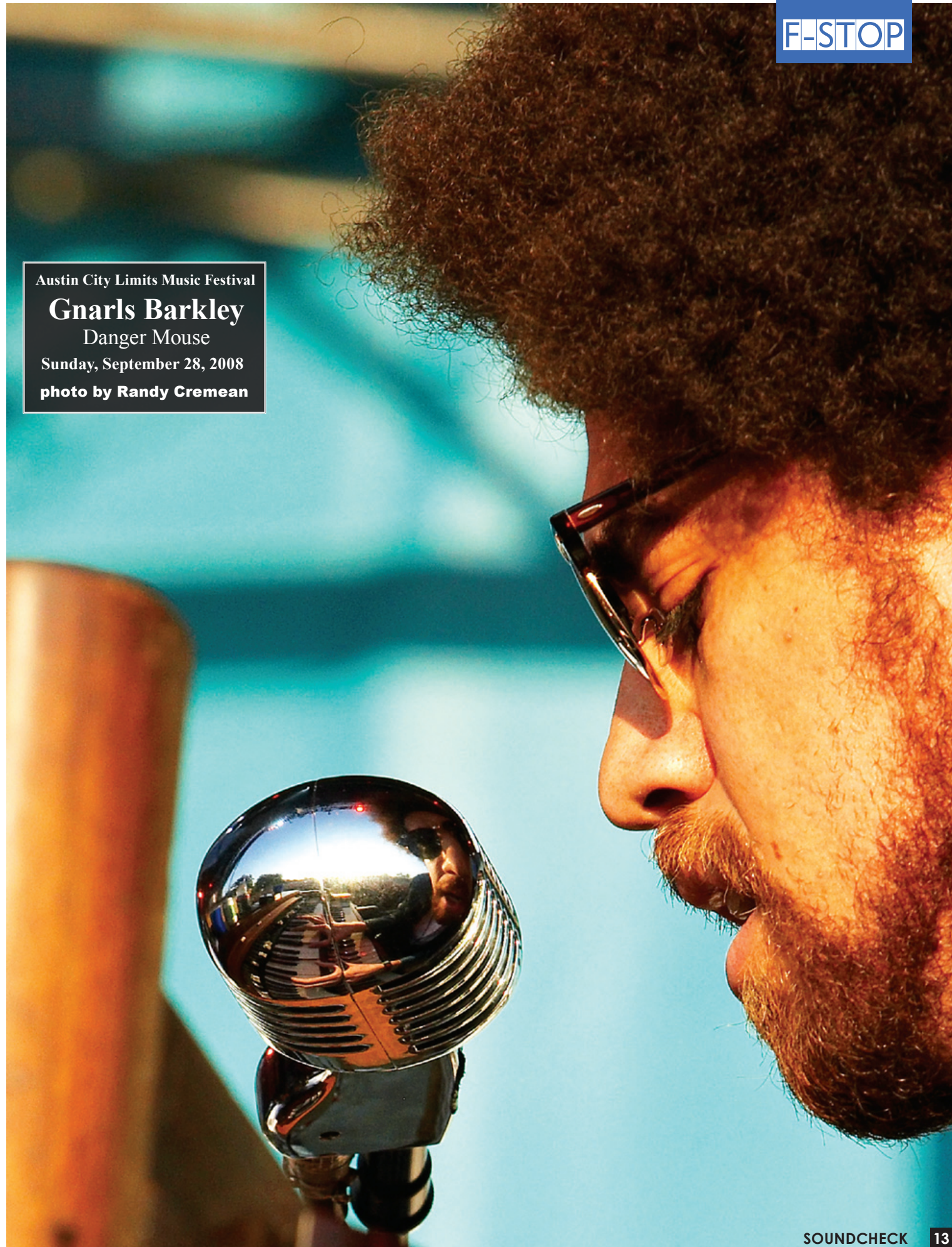
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Austin City Limits Music Festival  
**Band of Horses**  
Ben Bridwell  
Sunday, September 28, 2008  
photo by Randy Cremean



Austin City Limits Music Festival  
**Gnarls Barkley**  
Danger Mouse  
Sunday, September 28, 2008  
photo by Randy Cremean



Austin City Limits Music Festival  
**Erykah Badu**  
Saturday, September 27, 2008  
photo by Randy Cremean



Austin City Limits Music Festival  
**The Mars Volta**  
Cedric Bixler-Zavala  
Friday, September 26, 2008  
photo by Randy Cremean



La Zona Rosa, Austin, TX  
**The Roots**  
 Damon "Tuba Gooding Jr."  
 Bryson & Owen Biddle  
 Sunday, October 12, 2008  
 photo by Victor Yiu



Stubb's, Austin, TX  
**The Hives**  
 Howlin' Pelle Almqvist  
 Tuesday, September 16, 2008  
 photo by Randy Cremean



Austin Music Hall, Austin, TX  
**Kings of Leon**  
Caleb Followill  
Saturday, October 25, 2008  
photo by Randy Cremean



Austin Music Hall, Austin, TX  
**The Stills**  
Tim Fletcher  
Saturday, October 25, 2008  
photo by Randy Cremean

Margot  
& the NUCLEAR  
SO & SO'S

GROWING UP  
INDIE



words by Elliot Cole  
photos by Randy Cremean

Nobody ever said growing up was easy. Between the cracking voices, awkward new hairs, and acne that resembles the terrain of Mars, we also had to try not to have our asses stuffed into lockers on a daily basis. Now try growing up in the public spotlight, where everyone has a full view into your volatile, capricious emotional landscape. For Margot and the Nuclear So and So's, this is an everyday reality. Already tagged as having one of the most anticipated albums of the year in *Animal!*, the Indianapolis-based group is on the cusp of indie stardom. Soon, they may have every opportunity to revel in sold-out tours and magazine spreads. For now, however, the band is learning how to grow up ... and we're all watching.

"It's a little bit embarrassing," says Richard Edwards, the soft-spoken 23-year-old singer/songwriter behind Margot. Edwards is referring to growing up in the public eye, something the band has had to deal with since the release of *The Dust of Retreat*, their 2005 debut album that earned critical praise as well as a magnifying lens focused squarely on the group's love-and-loss themes. The album was a poignant, sweeping pop effort, dabbling in orchestral ambition and interpersonal sensitivity. From the rousing "Quiet as a Mouse" to the soft, late-night melodies of "Talking in Code", the disc is a sing-a-long effort in unbridled, unreserved emotion, the kind that shines with heart-on-the-sleeve sincerity. It also was bittersweet, showing glimmers of a band that had mastered maudlin minor chords and bubbly harmonies alike.

*The Dust of Retreat* also is a bit of a double-edged sword for Edwards. He sits on the chipped paint of bench in the courtyard of Emo's, answering thoughtfully, but with some degree of nervous reservation.

"I was really young when I wrote that record," he explains. "I made that record at everyone's age for your first break-up with that long-term girlfriend who you think you love and all this nonsense. I didn't have much world experience. I didn't know how to step back from that and make it a little more interesting."

Heartbreak, of course, is a better teacher than any classroom could offer.

While he obviously has an embattled relationship with his past songs, those same elements that he attributes to being young are, ironically, the same elements that are Margot's strength. Edwards is unabashedly honest, singing from an unequivocally personal perspective on matters close to the heart, from drugs ("Jen is Bringin' the Drugs") to missing home ("Bookworm") to, uh, cats ("Paper Kitten Nightmare").

**"I made that record at everyone's age for your first break-up with that long-term girlfriend who you think you love and all this nonsense. I didn't have much world experience. I didn't know how to step back from that and make it a little more interesting."**

Along with the album came an outpouring of buzz, which, as Edwards acknowledges, is as much a blessing as it is a curse. He admits that he felt the group was on the brink of blowing up.

"It did, a little bit, when our first record came out. And I think it was close enough to the dawning of the whole blog-band thing, but it's also a little bit scary for that reason ... A lot of those bands [have] a really hyped first record and then are just disposable, just like any other band. I want to make sure not to get caught up in that enough to where it affects us in any way."

"Disposable" isn't in the vocabulary when it comes to Margot, but the group still never seemed to entirely capitalize on the blogosphere buzz. Part of that had to do with their label at the time, V2. Just as the group was finishing their album, V2 was "going under", making promotion and distribution a dicey issue. Other, less-tangible elements were at work, as well.

"I don't think we fit in with whatever the sound of indie rock is right now," Edwards explains. "A lot of it is really good, but ... I think there is some ceiling we could hit."

That ceiling, however, is high, in no small part because of the supporting cast. A "pop band with a bunch of weirdos," according to Edwards, Margot – named after Gwyneth Paltrow's stoic character in 2001's *The Royal Tenenbaums* – is an entourage unto itself. Edwards met Chris and Andy Fry, Hubert Glover, Casey Tennis, Emily and Tyler Watkins, and Erik Kang one summer when Edwards was playing solo shows in Indianapolis, and the band quickly forged a bond to the point that, at one time, they all lived under the same roof.

"The last three years, every day, we go to the bar together. It's like a family," Edwards says with a smile.



**"We turned in our record, and they didn't like it. They didn't think they could sell it. It went back and forth for a couple of months. Basically, it came down to, 'We release ours; you guys can release whatever songs from the sessions you want on this other thing.'"**

But that was then, and, with the recently released *Animal!*, Margot now is hitting a musical puberty of sorts: an awkward process of bullies, growing up, and learning that the real world is, in fact, a total bitch. *Animal!* became the focal point of a disagreement between the band and the its new label, Epic Records. When asked about the dispute, Edwards is slightly evasive.

"It's a long ...," he starts, but trails off with a sigh. "We turned in our record, and they didn't like it. They didn't think they could sell it. It went back and forth for a couple of months. Basically, it came down to, 'We release ours; you guys can release whatever songs from the sessions you want on this other thing.'"

The results are complicated (this is, after all, the teenage years for the band, so complications should be expected). Margot has released two albums, *Animal!* (composed of the band's own track listing and available online and in vinyl) and the label's official release, titled – with a noticeable middle finger shot in Epic's direction, mind you – *Not Animal!* (released online as well as on vinyl and CD).

Business gossip aside, *Animal!* has been unleashed, one way or another. It shows obvious marks of maturation: the band is bolder in its songwriting, rougher around the edges, and more focused in its poignancy. The album carries occasional moments of twanginess that *The Dust of Retreat* never mastered, and the slower numbers avoid fruitless sap, instead drunkenly swaying through idiosyncratic lyricism.

"We want to erase anything that happened on whatever record we made last and completely forget that we've done it," Edwards says, and it shows.

But Edwards' vocal sincerity still is the underlining strength of the group. He sings with an airy wispiess that resonates with a believable vulnerability. While *Animal!* may be revealing more breadth for the group, it's also immediately familiar.

"Whether people love that or hate it, it's a Margot record," Edwards says. "I'd really like that to happen, and I think it started to happen with the first [album]. It really establishes that, 'This is how Margot sounds.' I'd like us to be established as a band that writes really solid songs ... I don't think any of us need to be famous or buzzy or cool. I just want to really become really great at the craft of [being] a songwriter."

And, as Edwards grows up as a musician, he's showing signs of just that. He is quickly understanding the nuances of songwriting, both on a personal and collective level.

"It's like a really personal, fictional story," Edwards says of his lyricism. "You're in fiction class in college and you write this character named Thomas Johnston, but it's *you*. It's you mixed with this kid you thought was cool that you wished you were. Or the girl is this girl you really liked, but she's also the teacher that was really nice."

Yes, Edwards still harbors that embarrassment over the diary-heavy first album.

"It's a little young, a little bit heart-on-the-sleeve and naïve," he admits.

But while emotional susceptibility makes for an awkward stage in life, it also offers for a visceral muse, and *Animal!* indicates that the group is finding comfort in its growing pains. Sure, there have been bumps in the road, from Epic's response to the album to the collapse of their former label to the pressure of being on everyone's "next best thing" list. But, for Edwards, it's all part of the learning process. And for Margot and the Nuclear So and So's, it's all just part of growing up.

**"I'd like us to be established as a band that writes really solid songs ... I don't think any of us need to be famous or buzzy or cool. I just want to really become really great at the craft of [being] a songwriter."**



# GIRL TALK

FEEDING THE ANIMALS,  
MAKING BELIEVERS

words by Derek Wright  
photos by Randy Cremean



A half-hour before Girl Talk's performance at this year's Lollapalooza, there's a girl sitting within earshot of the stage, leaning against a small fence. As the size of the Sunday night crowd doubles – then triples – in anticipation for the laptop artist's slot, she rests cross-legged about 50 yards from the speaker towers. For now, she's still on the outskirts of the mob, text-messaging her friends who are elsewhere in Chicago's Grant Park to decide whether to stay and watch an artist whom she's only heard about or leave and claim an early spot for headliner Nine Inch Nails.

But by the time Gregg Gillis transforms himself from an unassuming former office employee into his Girl Talk persona, the girl and her little pocket of crowd-free space will be gone. The gyrating masses soon will number in the tens of thousands, reaching shoulder-to-shoulder well into the distance from the small side stage. The girl, however, won't be among them. She'll be dancing, certainly, but doing so onstage. The unsuspecting concert-goer will be one of about 50 fans randomly handed a wristband moments before the gig, granting them the best spots in the house.

As the 6:30 p.m. show begins – with a sample of UGK and OutKast's Andre 3000 rapping over The Spencer Davis Group's "Gimme Some Lovin'" – a girl, who literally was on the fence deciding whether to stay, now is a key component in one of the weekend's most buzzed-about performances.

The choreographed chaos of that surprise, which was OK'd unbeknown to onsite Lollapalooza security members, is the same keep-'em-guessing formula exercised on this year's *Feed the Animals* and Girl Talk's 2006 LP, *Night Ripper*. Despite the music's choppy disposition and stop-on-a-dime pace, it's less of an anything-goes approach than it is an orchestrated riot of visual, aural, sensory theater. The more than 300 cut-and-pasted samples on his most recent LP were meticulously selected – much like the dancers and costume-clad stagehands at that August gig – during the course of two years and crafted amid an intense six-month editing session to create the give-and-take relationship that has come to define today's Gillis.

"I love being in a small club where everyone is sweaty and I can touch every single human being. But when you're playing in front of thousands of people, it becomes less dependant on that," Gillis said. "At a lot of [club] shows, people are looking for you to make a connection,

"I **LOVe** BEING IN A SMALL CLUB  
WHERE EVERYONE IS **SWEATY**  
AND I CAN **TOUCh** EVERY  
SINGLE **HUMAN** BEING."

and I like to make that connection. But at festivals, they don't really expect it. [Performers are] a bit more isolated. But at the same time, so many people can transcend that, and it can become a bigger party."

Gillis would know; he's had experience in both settings. Since his *Illegal Art* breakout release more than two years ago, the 26-year-old has been able to quit his job as a biomedical researcher in Pittsburgh and turn Girl Talk from a weekend side project into a worldwide phenomenon. With a reputation for shows that often end with a sweaty Gillis dressed in only his boxers and a headband to hold back his shoulder-length brown locks, he's one of several full-body performers in the vein of acts such as The Show is the Rainbow and ex-tourmate Dan Deacon. Girl Talk shows are an interactive experience that first found the musician traveling the U.S. in small dance clubs and now is making him a part of the global festival circuit. The mash-up extraordinaire has lugged his prized computer the world over, and by doing so, he has mined Top 40 radio across continents to remix and reconstruct songs, assembling them into his original material.

But his style of music – reworking the sounds of others – isn't without its detractors. While Gillis appears almost boastful when mentioning that he hasn't faced any copyright lawsuits, he sounds equally serious when quipping that this generation's "Rock 'N' Roll Starter Kit" should include footnotes on the "fair use" clause from the U.S. Copyright Office. It's a clause that Gillis and his ironically named label must pay close attention to when deconstructing clips for Girl Talk. The clause states that, among other things, audio is subject to re-use based on the length sampled compared with the length of the parent material, as well as whether the repositioned work will have a negative financial affect on the original.

"Through sampling, you can manipulate [songs] in any way – just like you can manipulate any sound of music with a guitar," Gillis said of his ability to remix and fuse notes together. "You can take a guitar and do anything you want with it. You can take a Beatles song and make it into a rap song or make it into a country song. You can do what you want with it. With technology, you can manipulate it to be nothing like the original."

Somewhere between a DJ who builds electronic music from scratch and a human jukebox who soundtracks parties by playing songs in their entirety, Gillis aligns himself with the likes of DJ Shadow – who holds the Guinness World Record for creating the first album entirely constructed from pre-recorded material. It's this embrace of technology that saw Gillis release *Feed the Animals* in June using the "Radiohead model," allowing users to download the album and name their own piece.

"It is very technology-driven, but there are some old-school assets to it," Gillis said of feeling a tad hypocritical if he did not utilize the most tech-savvy way of releasing the LP. "Specifically, putting out an album in general that is a whole album – a 50-minute piece of music that you have to listen to in one setting – is very anti- the current trend in technology where it's all about the singles. I put together an album that has people talking about this ADD culture, and people say my music is reflective of society's short attention spans. But at the same time, it's forcing people to listen to a big piece of music in a way that maybe they haven't done in a long time."

He's right in that neither *Night Ripper* nor *Feed the Animals* is meant for single servings, in spite of naming the individual tracks. With albums that play like an "Eye Spy" for music geeks, the short blips reveal a whopping dose of mainstream



tunes with nary an obscure sample, despite culling multiple genres from several decades. It's why even the back row of the Lollapalooza audience danced just as hard as the girl onstage and why people who attended the festival for Kanye West and Lupe Fiasco danced alongside people who came for Blues Traveler and Wilco. It's as though Gillis is fully aware that his music is a networking tool by which he can meet every person in a room.

And just like a good businessman who knows that if he talks to people about themselves long enough, they'll in return never forget him, Gillis uses his music as conversation. But he can't sit down with each member of the audience; instead, he makes them feel comfortable through a steady dose of songs that they already know and love. It's why he'll sample Radiohead, Jay-

Z, Nirvana, and Twisted Sister instead of many of the hipster acts that he so often shares concert bills with.

"Like with any band, you have to put up your limits and say, 'This is the type of music we're going to play,'" said Gillis, who remembers a time in high school when he saw Otomo Yoshitake and the Spice Girls in the same week. "A lot of the time, people give me CDs that I'm probably not ever going to sample. I love seeing acts like Battles or Jamie Lidell, but that doesn't really work with the type of music I want to make."

That music comes at a time when the industry is in flux, something that isn't lost during the downloading process of *Feed the Animals*. After users enter their proposed price for the 14-song album, they are given choices to explain why

"Hearing **music** has lots of value - emotionally, socially. You just don't have to pay for it. The actual song doesn't actually hold **Value** anymore. Previously, if you'd hear a song on the radio and wanted to hear it again, you'd have to go out and **pay** for it. If you used that sample, it was valuable because you had to use your **OWN** money to get it. But now, in 2008, when you can hear anything for **Free**, actually hearing the music doesn't really hold monetary value."

they offered to pay the given amount. The options range from sarcastic ones, such as, "I don't really like Girl Talk," to cynical reasons, such as, "I am a part of the press, radio, or music industry." Yet a few of the options - "I don't believe in paying for music" and "I don't value music made from sampling" - show Gillis' awareness that his is an uphill quest for respect and that some might view his trade as less than legitimate.

It's a viewpoint that began in the late 1990s with Napster, which recently was bought by Best Buy for more than \$121 million in hopes of saving what once was an Internet powerhouse. That digital music debate has carried on through iTunes, Oink, Rhapsody and the recently launched MySpace Music. Both legal and illegal Web sites have played public roles in the ever-shrinking world of hard copies, and Gillis finds Girl Talk smack dab in the thick of that evolution.

"People are getting used to the CD dying and digital music becoming normal. People are a lot more used to there being a dialogue between the artist and the consumer other than just giv-

"I get very self-conscious about playing live. People think I just get up there and press **play**. But I mix it all live, and it can be tough. When **NIGHT RIPPER** came out, it took a few months to catch on. By the time everyone heard it, I had been working on new stuff. But with **Feed The Animals**, everyone heard it the day I finished it. So at the **shows** the next weekend, that's the newest material I had."

ing them a product," Gillis said of the changing ways music is sold and distributed. "Hearing music has lots of value - emotionally, socially. You just don't have to pay for it. The actual song doesn't actually hold value anymore. Previously, if you'd hear a song on the radio and wanted to hear it again, you'd have to go out and pay for it. If you used that sample, it was valuable because you had to use your own money to get it. But now, in 2008, when you can hear anything for free, actually hearing the music doesn't really hold monetary value."

On albums, maybe. Live, however, the tickets still cost money, and people at festivals such as Lollapalooza are turning over a pretty penny to see Girl Talk sets. It's why Gillis puts as much effort into micromanaging his LPs as he does turning his concerts into extravagant and free-flowing affairs. The Lollapalooza stop was just one in a series of fluctuating and increasingly hectic tour dates, which have seen him visit just Chicago on at least three occasions in 18 months, each time expounding on his previous routine. This summer's festival featured gigantic "G"



and "T" balloons and Gillis surfing the crowd in a raft. It came almost a year to the day after a spectacular Windy City stint at The Pitchfork Music Festival, which was a half-year on the heels of a sparkler-waving, costume party at the city's Empty Bottle club on New Year's Eve. It's as though Gillis understands that he'll never be as young as he is at this moment, and he wants to make damn sure he acts like it - while also being aware of the responsibilities that come with being an entertainer.

"I get very self-conscious about playing live. People think I just get up there and press play. But I mix it all live, and it can be tough. When *Night Ripper* came out, it took a few months to catch on. By the time everyone heard it, I had been working on new stuff. But with *Feed the Animals*, everyone heard it the day I finished it.

So at the shows the next weekend, that's the newest material I had," Gillis said on how his albums translate to live performances. "It's like how people are selling music through [video games] 'Rock Band' and 'Guitar Hero.' That music is being used there, and people are interacting and pretty much remixing those songs themselves by playing along. They are interacting to music the same way I'm interacting to music. So when I play live - in a weird way - it's just an extension of what these people are doing at home on their own."

For Gillis, it's clear that serving as that extension between other artists' music and his own fans requires a familiar first impression - whether that's on an LP at home, or with them dancing on stage in front of tens of thousands of strangers.



## TV On The Radio

### A GOLDEN AGE

words by Ryan Ffrench  
photos by Randy Cremean

Nov. 5, 2008:

*Complex industrial society seeking band to forge national consciousness, absolve historical grievances and make sense of new cultural zeitgeist.*

*Inquire within.*

A vacancy has opened in the contemporary American music scene like a personal want ad hanging over the heart of the nation's cultural identity. With the agitprop political tirades of artists such as Rage Against the Machine and Green Day increasingly coming across as reductionist and juvenile propaganda while all the Coldplay spinoffs sitting atop the Billboard charts look more and more like throw-away commercial schlock everyday, the mainstream music industry is turning toward the independents for the next big band to write big, generation-defining albums.

But from Animal Collective's ecstatic experimentalism to the abstract futurism of Battles or the quietly meditative lyricism of Joanna Newsom, the predominant aesthetic sensibility of modern indie rock leans toward introspection rather than external engagement. These artists look inward rather than out into the world, and so express themselves more on the level of individual experience than of a general socio-political awareness. Who, then, will step up and play the role of national poet? Who will provide a measured voice for a nation so rapturously intoxicated on the prospect of change promised by a Barack Obama administration? Look abroad: England has its Radiohead; Canada, its Arcade Fire; and the Universe, its Bono. Kanye West can't run this show single-handedly.

Let's face it: these are confusing times. Obama is choosing a puppy to bring into the White House (that seems good), but the Dow Jones just dropped another 500 points (that's bad). The world looks set to give America a chance to redeem its international (dis)repute – but we're still caught between two wars. We're cracking open the champagne with the covers still pulled up to our chins – and it's ... weird.

Enter TV on the Radio, Brooklyn's erstwhile avant-garde provocateurs whose tendency to unleash huge, critic-flooring albums right at those teetering moments in our cultural history has propelled them into the attention of the mainstream. But don't think of them as self-consciously activist or even necessarily as political enthusiasts. They're just a 21st-century rock band prone to making big generational statements on the back of records that, in the midst of the thousands of new bands filling the airspace everyday, still feel somehow important. After all, that's what "big" bands do, right?

"We've never gone out of our way to say, 'OK, we have a bunch of blank space here, let's make a politically leaning song.'" front man Tunde Adebimpe, explained. "It's just always come out at a time when these things were very much a part of our discussions and a part of our lives." The political climate, then, is not so much the subject of his art as it is the catalyst – a determinate factor in his daily experience as an American. "Writing a song is the act of taking an

**"WE'VE NEVER GONE OUT OF OUR WAY TO SAY, OK, WE HAVE A BUNCH OF BLANK SPACE HERE, LET'S MAKE A POLITICALLY LEANING SONG. IT'S JUST ALWAYS COME OUT AT A TIME WHEN THESE THINGS WERE VERY MUCH A PART OF OUR DISCUSSIONS AND A PART OF OUR LIVES."**

event or something that's affecting you and distilling it into a more manageable form," he explained.

And it is in this process of distillation that great bands manage to take the particular and make it universal.

Back in 2006, with the Iraq war disintegrating into chaos and America's international reputation quickly doing the same, TV on the Radio released *Return to Cookie Mountain*, a grandiose album steeped in apocalyptic disorder that refused to turn away from a world it saw as terrifyingly out of control. But their vision was measured, and after the album's evocative opening lines, "I was a lover / before this war", Adebimpe and co-songwriter Kyp Malone sidestepped easy nihilism by allowing themselves a tasteful flirtation with the redemptive powers of hope and love.

And now, two and a half years later, comes *Dear Science*, – TV on the Radio's most accessibly mainstream and artistically ambitious album to date. And it couldn't have come at a more appropriate time (incidentally, nor could have this morning-after-Election-Day interview). As a black musician deeply invested in the idea of a post-racial America, Adebimpe sees the election not just in the sense of healing a long history of deeply embedded prejudice, but as a step forward for an entire nation too long held back by retrograde politics.

"It's a triumph for Americans in general," he confirmed. "In terms of both the ingenuity and possibilities laid out in our Constitution, Obama represents the best things about our country." And, although Adebimpe readily awaits the international ramifications of Obama's election, his summation of events is not without a sense of that old American shame: "I think a lot of people around the world are looking at us now and thinking, 'Cool, you've come back to your senses – even though it took a total maniac running the world into the ground for you to realize it.'"

It is fitting, then, that *Dear Science*, should prove to be a record so profoundly disillusioned with America's past while simultaneously looking toward a promise of deep and lasting change. But Adebimpe is quick to make it clear that his band does not intend to present a solution to the myriad of problems still confronting the nation.

"It's more like taking a snapshot of something that's in front of you," he explained. "You are not really sure what that thing is, but, through music, you can analyze later in a different context."

Of course, the process of change is just beginning, and the cultural legacy of this new phase in America's music history is yet to be written.

"I'm not really sure what effect it will have on what we do," Adebimpe admitted. "I would love it if we never had to write a song about something horribly fucked up that someone was doing ever again." After musing about the various trajectories his writing could develop in the coming years, he concluded contemplatively: "In whatever degree the world shifts, I hope that every coming day that we're alive makes us produce different sorts of music."

Despite all the future uncertainty, one thing appears set in stone: TV on the Radio will continue to expand upon their already extensive sound with each successive record, further blurring the distinction between the lo-fi indie rock of influences such as the Pixies or Pavement and whatever it means to be mainstream.

"Writing songs for a big sound is not really a conscious decision on

**“WRITING SONGS FOR A BIG SOUND IS NOT REALLY A CONSCIOUS DECISION ON OUR PART, BUT I THINK IT’S JUST THE WAY THAT WE WORK. IT’S A SLOW BUILDING PROCESS. ALL OF OUR SONGS START OUT IN THE MOST LO-FI WAY POSSIBLE. I STILL RECORD THINGS ON A FOUR TRACK—USUALLY A CAPPELLA WITH A LITTLE BIT OF KEYBOARDS. AFTER THAT, EVERYONE JUST STARTS ROUNDING OUT THE IDEAS.”**





our part,” Adebimpe explained, “but I think it’s just the way that we work.” He goes on to elaborate: “It’s a slow building process. All of our songs start out in the most lo-fi way possible. I still record things on a four track – usually a cappella with a little bit of keyboards. After that, everyone just starts rounding out the ideas.”

But whatever the method, the results are unambiguous. From the opening wall of noise of “Halfway Home” onward, *Dear Science*, feels big in a way that demands its audience stand up and take immediate notice. This is a sound designed to fill stadiums – and for an era of stadium-rock accustomed to the self-indulgent ego coddling of bands such as Creed or even the Red Hot Chili Peppers, this is an exciting thing. It is the sound of five progressive musicians taking advantage of the technological and cultural circumstances offered to create something that feels idiosyncratic yet firmly rooted in both place and time. Unlike so many other great releases of the year, *Dear Science*, feels distinctly American in sensibility and unmistakably like a product of its generation in both atmosphere and execution.

And behind it all, as always, is Dave Sitek’s production. Meticulously clean and densely layered, his balanced hand allows Adebimpe and Malone to show restraint in their delivery without risking the sense of urgency and magnitude that makes these songs work. Under the guidance of a producer as experienced and diverse as Sitek, TV on the Radio’s aesthetic horizons can only continue to broaden, accepting no limits but those which they establish for themselves. Soaking up roots as disparate as punk, free jazz, doo-wop, and noise rock, Sitek’s vision synthesizes a unique voice that feels deeply immersed in music history and yet always thoroughly modern.

But Adebimpe is eager to stress that TV on the Radio’s temporal relevance and refined aesthetic come from more than mere technological dexterity or tasteful fusion of influences.

“It’s really just communicating your own experiences personally, and therefore uniquely, as only you can do,” he concluded. “I remember sitting in class in film school when I was 19 or 20, thinking that everyone was only making films about films that they had seen. I mean, at that age, not many people had lived a life that they had learned to process and to extract elements from in order to construct a story. But by the time you’re 18, you have had a whole bunch of experiences. People are just hesitant to make them into something because they wouldn’t look like something that anyone’s seen before.”

His advice for the next generation of artists doesn’t stop there: “Unless you sprang fully formed out of the head of Zeus, you have to start with imitation. You learn through that imitation to develop your own language and start going for it in that direction. And of course it is going to look and sound weird, but it’s really the only way to go.”

However, to create an individual artistic vision is one thing. To provide a voice to a nation caught in a historical cultural upheaval through the power of indie rock is another altogether. An American cultural Golden Age is before us, and it will fall upon bands such as TV on the Radio to conceptualize this experience and set it to the music that will shape our generation. But first, Adebimpe had to get ready after hanging up from this interview, go downstairs in his Los Angeles hotel room, and prepare to take his very first steps into an America in which things will (hopefully) never be the same. His final thoughts: “You know, it’s just going to be interesting to walk out onto the streets and see people who aren’t having to pretend to be happy anymore.”

“UNLESS YOU SPRANG FULLY FORMED OUT OF THE HEAD OF ZEUS, YOU HAVE TO START WITH IMITATION. YOU LEARN THROUGH THAT IMITATION TO DEVELOP YOUR OWN LANGUAGE AND START GOING FOR IT IN THAT DIRECTION. AND OF COURSE IT IS GOING TO LOOK AND SOUND WEIRD, BUT IT’S REALLY THE ONLY WAY TO GO.”

# Smoking Popes: Staying Down

words by Derek Wright  
photos by Victor Yiu



It's a rainy Sunday night in Chicago, and about 2,000 people are filing out of the Belmont Arts & Music Festival.

At 10 p.m., the two-day event on Chicago's North Side has all but wound down. The vendors that range from local artists to restaurateurs have closed their booths. The auxiliary stage at the east end has been vacant for a couple of hours, and the weekend's headliners – Smoking Popes – have just finished their set on the main stage at the opposite end of the street.

Tucked between not-quite-high-rise condos and nestled next to a small playground, a couple of blocks are barricaded each year by promoters in one of the city's trendiest areas. Although the redbrick complexes prevent any glimpse of the famous skyline, everything else about the setting is undoubtedly the Windy City. Cubs and White Sox banners hang over several adjacent balconies. "Barack Obama for Senate" posters are faded but still lodged on windowsills. Thick accents straight from the *Saturday Night Live* "Super Fan" parody boom out over the last few slices of Chicago-style pizza and their hometown hotdog counterparts.

The fest could be any in the series of Chamber of Commerce-sanctioned celebrations that mark individual neighborhoods. This one just happens to be in late June, and it just happens to be the one in the Roscoe Village district.

As the crowd moves toward the gates, a woman is lingering with her teenage son near the lone merchandise table. It's dark, but the light from the street lamp above glistens off their damp faces. Their clothes hang awkwardly on their chilled frames, the result of periodic rain that plagued the afternoon and gave way to a breezy night. But instead of using the Smoking Popes shirt that she just bought as a towel, she folds it carefully and hands it to the youngster. Then she folds a second one and puts it in her own bag. Then another. And another. Before long, her large purse is packed with Tees for herself and her boy's closest pals – 23 of his friends, to be exact.

"She bought how many?" singer Josh Caterer asked as the news made its way backstage shortly after his lengthy set. "Twenty-five?"

The soft-spoken 36-year-old's voice is uncharacteristically wavering. Onstage, his chops hit the kind of pitch-perfect emotions that can cause his band's live recordings to be mistaken for studio ones. When speaking, however, the polite front man sounds cautious to raise his tone above a library level. Yet tonight, even his reserved demeanor can't mask the shock – and gratitude – with the sale.

So it seems almost unnecessary when Stefanie

Caterer, who was at the merchandise stand, tracks down her husband and asks him to come thank the woman who still is stuffing the last couple of T-shirts in to her bag. Before the lead Pope can get his answer ("Twenty-five?"), he takes a Converse All-Star-clad leap over a small puddle en route to the booth. Even if Josh Caterer doesn't know the fan who just bought more than two-dozen shirts for the next generation of guitar-poppers, he soon will.

It's the reason that the Belmont Arts & Music Festival all day has felt like a homecoming show and not just a gig in the band's hometown. Walking through the masses before the performance, Josh Caterer, his brothers Matt and Eli, and drummer Neil Hennessy greeted old friends, soon-to-be-new friends and family friends. Shaking hands, giving hugs, flashing smiles, and anything short of kissing a few babies, the four had weaved their ways along the corridor through the sea of admirers. The onlookers never stared with the sort of amazement of those catching their first peek at a celebrity, but rather with the relief of spotting long-lost companions. It was just nice to see the guys again.

Originally from Northwest Illinois, this is the band members' adopted home. Maybe they adopted the city, maybe the city adopted them. It didn't matter. They were there, and everything about that rainy June night was undoubtedly Chicago.

***"Don't wake me now/And break my world in little pieces/I've got no where else to go, baby/Don't wake me now/I need this dream to last forever/We can make it if we just stay down." – Smoking Popes, "Stay Down".***

The title track to this year's *Stay Down* is as appropriate as it is discouraging.

Through some speakers, it's a testament to Josh Caterer's devout Christianity. Midway through the LP, the ode to staying on course is the perfect song to start the record's – and the Popes' – proverbial Side B. It's reassurance that rock 'n' roll isn't always the devil's music and that religion can have a place on record store racks next to Elliot Smith and Sonic Youth.

But through another set of speakers, the title is a painful reminder of the band's breakup. For all its accuracy in describing the vocalist's spirituality, "Stay Down" makes a bold bet that fans won't remember that Smoking Popes disbanded

in 1998, or that the album's ironic namesake marks the ensemble's first new material in more than a decade.

"Up until the Pixies reunited, there were not any lists [that] you could look to see something like that happened," bassist Matt Caterer said over brunch a month after the Belmont concert. "Up until the Pixies, I was like, 'There's no way; it's not going to be cool. There's no way we could make it cool. It's never cool when a band gets back together. We're not going to be any different than any band that tried to get back together.' But then the Pixies did it, and it seemed cool."

Caterer has his back to the restaurant at a Chicago café, his military hat pulled down to the top of his black-rimmed glasses. Throughout the meal, he spouts out names like non-sequiturs when they pop into his mind: "Mission of Burma." "Dinosaur Jr." "There has to be another band that put out a good record after awhile."

The group's senior member doesn't look like he's changed much in the past decade. He's older, sure, but his shaved head then didn't look much different than it does today at 40, and sneakers and jeans fit similarly at any age. The same can be said for all three of the brothers. Josh Caterer still wears his blue guitar just as low on his hip, strung over his blazers and striped ties. And aside from a beard – something he might have been able to grow when he joined the band in his teens – Eli Caterer goes about his unassuming ways today as he did in the late '90s.

From the outside, these are the same guys who had turned their punk-fused love songs into tours with Green Day, Jimmy Eat World and Morrissey just about the time they were having their first legal drink. There was no make-over, no stylized return calculated with glossy PR. They still are just middle-aged brothers with a propensity for gloomy album titles: their 1993 debut, *Get Fired*; its breakthrough follow-up, *Born to Quit*; and then 1997's near-perfect *Destination Failure*. But from the inside, a few lifestyle changes – and a couple of roster moves – make this version of Smoking Popes a far cry from those nicotine-fueled twenty-somethings that came from Chicago's suburbs.

***"Climb aboard that tour bus/Down the road less traveled/Every song sounds like the last one/Let's make this next one a fast one." – Smoking Popes, "Theme From 'Cheerleader'".***



Musicians – and the cities that they so often come to define – are victims of their own parameters. Be it fundamental, or at the very least geographical, artist collectives build their identities as much on their sounds as they do the company they keep. Performers in pockets such as San Francisco (1967), London (1977), Seattle (1991), and New York (2001) embraced associations with those hotbeds as much as they battled the stereotypes that came with them.

“Chicago bands seem quite happy to keep it a woodsheddens town and be left to their own devices and to do their own thing,” said James VanOsdol, a longtime radio personality who built a reputation championing local music.

From 1993-2000, the jockey was the assistant music director and local show host at the city’s WKQX-FM – aka Q101. At one of the nation’s leaders in embracing what would become known as “alternative,” VanOsdol manned the airwaves for the entirety of Smoking Popes’ first run and one of the most vibrant periods in his hometown’s history. For the past few years, the 38-year-old has been up to his trademark sideburns in research on a book about the era, tentatively titled *Chicago Rocked*.

“Just look at 1993 alone. You had Urge Overkill’s *Saturation*, Liz Phair’s *Exile in Guyville* and The [Smashing] Pumpkins’ *Siamese Dream*. Those are all great records,” VanOsdol said.

“Back then, it seemed like everybody was getting signed.”

Smoking Popes were no different.

In 1995, Capitol Records released the band’s major label debut, *Born to Quit*, a prophetically titled collection of chunky pop songs. It was upon this output that the brothers Caterer packed their suitcases and relocated from their suburban stomping grounds to the big city. It also was because of this release that stations with people such as VanOsdol first took notice.

“I’d like to say I was there for the early EPs, but my first impression of the Popes was *Born to Quit*,” said the journalist whose influential pipes still boom as loudly today as back then. “I couldn’t get enough of Josh’s voice. It was three-chord punk rock, but with this melodic singing over it. It sounded like nothing else I had heard.”

Although it didn’t sound exactly like something that VanOsdol was accustomed to, the LP incorporated elements of artists whom the brothers adored. Culling their influences from Dinosaur Jr. to Jawbreaker, the 10 songs sounded strangely familiar but not too recognizable, like a person unsure whether he or she experienced déjà vu. Even Josh Caterer’s distinct voice was a hybrid of Frank Sinatra’s croon and Morrissey’s aloof swagger, a comparison that would become un-

avoidable after The Smiths’ front man famously referred to the album as “extraordinary, the most lovable thing I’d heard in years.”

But most notably, songs such as “Rubella” and “Need You Around” were unapologetically power pop. Despite the tempo of the album’s most memorable tracks, the group’s knack for harmony was undeniable, and the Caterers couldn’t dodge the label of being Chicago’s latest in a string of guitar-pop gems. It’s a lineage that runs back through Off Broadway and Shoes to its start with Cheap Trick in the late 1970s. Yet, aside from Material Issue, the bands all had been transplants, moving from various suburbs and setting up shop somewhere along Lake Michigan.

So it was only natural that Smoking Popes – with their surplus of guitar hooks – would make the 50-mile move and accept their new role as the pontiffs of Chicago power pop. In doing so, they would blaze a trail that a number of bands would take over the years: east along Interstate 90 and ending somewhere near Wrigley Field.

“After a certain time, we would have to go down to Chicago to see the Smoking Popes play because they had gotten so big,” said Alkaline Trio’s Matt Skiba, who hails from the same area in McHenry County, Illinois. “They were our favorite band; the reason that we started bands, and the reason we started spending so much time

in the actual city, was for both Popes’ and [Naked] Raygun’s shows.”

Kids only a year or two younger than the Caterers had a success story to point to, an act from the quaint, upper-middle class area that could cut it with Chicago performers. Aspiring musicians who had been chugging away in their bedrooms and garages now were coming together, and the Popes were proof that getting out of the suburbs could be as easy as mixing a few love letters over even fewer power chords. At least, that’s what it seemed like for the teens who followed in the band’s immediate wake, and that glimmer of hope was enough to inspire more than Alkaline Trio. A number of bands cropped up in the suburban vacancy created by the Caterer siblings.

About that same time, Brian Peterson, who had booked VFW shows in the guys’ hometown during the early 1990s, would stake claim to a rundown bowling alley on Chicago’s northwest side. Before long, the building – complete with its yellowing walls, decrepit lanes, and malfunctioning bathrooms – would become The Fireside Bowl, a punk club that helped shape the city until it abruptly stopped hosting concerts in 2004. With him, Peterson would bring fellow suburbanites such as Slapstick and The Lawrence Arms. It was a partnership like the one that these bands had watched Smoking Popes form with Metro owner Joe Shanahan, and one that they knew could create some security after moving to a new city. So much like the Caterers – and with their shadow still looming – this fresh crop of transplants had a venue to call home and a promoter willing to fight for them.

“I just loved that place so much,” said Rob Kellenberger, the former drummer for Slapstick, Tuesday, and Colossal, and who later would spend a stint with Smoking Popes. “Growing up, I always wanted to play Metro because that was the big club. But I always had more fun whenever we’d play The Fireside. That place was hugely influential because all the suburban bands knew we could get shows. So whenever we’d go on tour, we’d tell the other bands that whenever they came to Chicago, they could play there. So we’d go meet Less Than Jake, or Suicide Machines, or whoever, and when they’d come through town they’d always play The Fireside.”

By the late 1990s, the northwest suburbs sound that the Popes had jumpstarted was influencing not only Chicago’s sonic backdrop, but also was shaping the national landscape. Agents were clamoring to book their acts at Peterson’s small club, which still doubled as a bowling alley during the weekdays.

“We never really had any kind of coherent benchmarks, other than all of us feeling like we really enjoyed what we were doing and felt that we were pretty good at it,” Matt Caterer said, recall-

ing the mass migration that followed the Popes from the suburbs. “We just wanted to become a ‘real’ band. Then later ... I started to realize [bands that used to be heroes] also were peers of ours, and they might be looking at us the way I was looking at them. That’s when I started to realize we were a part of something that was nationwide that we had been a part of back in [the suburbs]. We were playing music and were part of a local scene. And then we just became part of the Chicago scene. And this national scene. With each step, we didn’t really realize it was happening.”

It has never been odd for Chicago to be at the center of the music universe. The city had birthed house music a decade before, which evolved into one of the most progressive industrial movements to date. It’s a blues town, immortalized by Robert Johnson long before Buddy Guy made his home there, or Elwood and Jake Blues donned their fedoras and matching sunglasses. Even today, while events such as Lollapalooza and the Pitchfork Music Festival plaster their rock-studded rosters over the city each year, hip-hop names such as Kanye West, Lupe Fiasco, Common, Kidz in the Hall, and The Cool Kids aren’t so much redefining the city’s reputation, but instead bolstering the eclectic one it already has.

“There are many different scenes in Chicago,” Alkaline Trio’s Skiba says, “but from what I’ve experienced, the ’80’s and ’90’s [punk] scene was bigger and stronger and tougher than anything I’ve ever seen in Chicago.”

Even if it is The City of Broad Shoulders, there’s only so much room for all those bands to share, especially with that Sears Tower-size chip, the result of acts having been told for so long that they weren’t as glamorous as those from L.A., or as tough as those from Detroit, or as innovative as those from Berlin.

“I don’t think there is that Second City Syndrome that people think there is,” VanOsdol says. “Maybe a little. And maybe a few bands more than others. But back then, people supported each other just for the music. Maybe this is revisionist history, but [the mid-’90s] was just such an exciting time for Chicago.”

And it wouldn’t be long until it was again.

**“This could be what we need right now/Tell me how it feels to be/The living end of your time.” – Smoking Popes, “End of Your Time”.**

By 1997, Smoking Popes had recorded *Destination Failure*, the band’s second LP for Capitol. The label paid what Matt Caterer calls “a fucking ton of money” to work with the late Jerry Finn. The producer was in the midst of a string of successes that included Pennywise, Jawbreaker, Rancid, and Green Day’s *Dookie*. The Popes’ sessions would bridge the gap to his work on albums by Superdrag, The Vandals, and The Living End and on pop-punk’s breakout title, Blink-182’s *Enema of the State*.

Yet despite the critical acclaim and industry anticipation, the label did little to promote the follow-up to *Born to Quit*. (In addition to its commercial success, *Quit*’s tracks had been featured on soundtracks for the teen comedies *Clueless*, *Angus*, and *Tommy Boy*.) The original *Failure* sessions didn’t culminate in anything that Capitol thought could get the band the same MTV play as the song “Need You Around” had done a few years before.

“*Destination Failure* might be our best work,” Matt Caterer lamented. “Most of that is because Jerry Finn [was] a fucking genius.”

But the label saw it differently, and it was only after some sternly worded encouragement that the band penned the album’s signature single, “I Know You Loved Me.” But despite a rigorous tour schedule, the album’s success hit a plateau.

Back home, the city was at a standstill, too. The Smashing Pumpkins were still dealing with the 1996 overdose death of keyboardist Jonathan Melvoin, and the subsequent firing of co-founder Jimmy Chamberlin would lead to a drastic makeover in their sound. Phair’s 1998 *whitechocolatespaceegg* would become her first album to fail to be certified Gold, selling less than the required 500,000 units. The national focus had turned its ears toward nu-metal, and acts such as the angst-ridden Disturbed were milking the public’s growing interest into sold-out hometown gigs.

It was something the Caterers could empathize with only from afar, as tours kept them away from their adopted city.

“Our whole thing before [getting signed] was, like, we’d hangout in kids’ basements where we practiced, smoking cigarettes, just sitting around doing whatever bullshit you do as a band,” Matt Caterer said. “But then, somehow, we improbably got into a position where we could actually take the next step to make plans as a band, and we sort of never – for whatever reason – we never came together as a band. We all sort of just went into our own individual lives and started freaking out. So then it was just a process over the next couple years of whimpering and disintegration and anger.”



It came to a head shortly after the release of *Destination Failure* when Josh Caterer overdosed on cocaine during party in California. Sprawled out on a balcony while waiting for the ambulance, the front man began to pray. It was a last-ditch effort by a person who was not raised in a religious household. The deal was simple: If he survived the night, he would turn himself – and his music – over to God.

And the next morning, the man whose band's name poked fun at the world's most recognizable Christian took steps to do just that.

***“But I’m not the boy that you destroyed/I’m stronger than he was/I had to be to survive/I’m lucky to be alive/The me you left behind/Is still lying there/With his eyes froze open wide.” – Smoking Popes, “I Was Right”.***

Smoking Popes always was a vehicle for Josh Caterer's lovelorn tales. The singer's heart wasn't just sewn on his sleeve; it was stapled, duct-taped, glued, and bolted there – just above

the name of every girl who broke it. “Christine.” “Megan.” “Sandra.” The then-26-year-old singer had put his faith in more relationships than he could write about, and had filled three LPs with songs about every one. However, after surviving his near-death experience, he was poised to put it into one with somebody even less tangible – Jesus Christ. By doing so, he would end the group that he and his brothers started back in their suburban basement, withdraw to his new lifestyle, and leave his siblings to fend for themselves.

“I was mad at Josh. But, more, I think we all were just mad at each other,” Matt Caterer said of the final months of 1998. “I just thought he was being a dick about the whole thing and also that he just wasn't being cool. Although, having said that, I didn't really want to be in the band anymore, either. But I also didn't want to not be in the band.”

It was a choice that would be made for Matt Caterer when his younger brother folded the group. And it was an experience the elder sibling cautiously avoided reliving a few years later when Josh and Eli Caterer formed Duvall, a Christian band in the musical likeness of Smoking Popes.

“The reason we couldn't do the Popes thing anymore was because I didn't want to be in a band about somebody else's spirituality,” Matt Caterer said. “And we didn't get along for a couple years.

We really needed to be away from each other, but we never hated each other.”

So Eli and Josh Caterer joined with drummer Kellenberger – a fellow suburbanite whose bands such as Slapstick had made the trek to the city several years before – to release a series of Duvall EPs and 2003's *Volume & Density*. And while his brothers were relearning how to be a band, Matt Caterer gallivanted about Chicago at night, and by day, he found solace in the music of others while managing a record store.

“I felt like one of the few great rock bands of modern times had been lost,” said Skiba, recalling the local post-Popes environment.

The Alkaline Trio front man was correct on more than one level. By 2001, Capitol had stopped printing copies of *Born to Quit*. Not only did the prospect of new Popes material seem dim, but the old music also was becoming harder to find.

“I really admire what [Josh] tried to do with [Duvall]. It almost was like a concept band. You could argue if it was successful or not, but I really admire it,” Matt Caterer said all these years later about watching his brothers' new act. “It just might have been too far out of the box; it sounded too different than normal Christian radio because it was a rock band. The people who wanted traditional rock ‘n’ roll were distrustful of it for the same reasons people can be distrust-



ful of religion. And people who wanted Christian music wanted something that sounded like everything else on Christian stations. But thinking about that back then would get me thinking about the Popes, and then I'd just think, ‘Heck, we blew it. We had our chance and failed. Fuck it, whatever.’ ”

The record industry had yet to learn how capitalize on the Internet, and lawsuits were still pending from the Napster fallout. Labels such as Capitol were tightening their purse strings, and more bands were writing stories similar to Smoking Popes' every day. Although Apple had recently launched a little upstart program in 2001 called iTunes, it had yet to make much of a dent in the market, and Matt Caterer was left watching his musical legacy slip into “used” bins at his corner record shop.

***“With all the simple times behind me/I can fail without regret/If I have to try, then I will never/Be able to forget.” – Smoking Popes, “Paul”.***

“Nostalgia is a very powerful thing. People grow up and begin to demand the things they

had when they were younger,” VanOsdol said. The author had been discussing his upcoming book, but soon his remarks turned back to Smoking Popes. “I always thought that it was such a weird end for the band. I wasn't surprised when they got back together for that show.”

After more than seven years since his overdose on that California balcony, Josh Caterer still was a devoted Christian. The singer's faith only had strengthened since leaving Smoking Popes, but now in his 30s with a wife and family, he was coming to grips with how his spirituality had affected others. Feeling better fit to avoid the temptations that he associated with his former life, he began kicking around the idea of reforming with his brothers as a way to get *Born to Quit* re-issued. With Eli Caterer already on board by way of Duvall, the future of the Popes rested with Josh and Matt reconciling the way the band had ended years earlier.

Coincidentally – or maybe by fate, depending on whom you ask – Chicago promotions giant Flowerbooking scheduled its 15-year anniversary at the Caterers' beloved Metro in September 2005. The recently debunked Promise Ring already had been approached about a one-night reunion for the fundraising event, and the opportunity was too perfectly timed for Josh Caterer to pass up.

“I remember my first thought when Josh told me

that he wanted to get the band back together was, ‘How is that going to be cool?’ ” Matt Caterer said. “But it took about a half-hour of convincing, and I agreed to do it. He made a point to reassure me that it wasn't going to be a vehicle for his spirituality, and I really appreciated that.”

The last time that the band had shared a stage was in December 1998, just a bit north at the Double Door. Then, the band was in shambles. Josh Caterer was learning how to weigh his newfound beliefs with a loyalty to his brothers. Eli and Matt Caterer were watching a family member – a man whom they had known for a quarter-century – change right before their eyes and take their livelihoods with him. The record industry was evolving and pitting bands, labels, and fans against one another. Even Chicago was shifting, and the place that had been so welcoming only a few years before had come to challenge Josh Caterer's resolve.

Yet, news of the reunion gig traveled quickly. And by the time tickets went on sale, there was enough buzz to sell out the 1,200-seat venue in less than 40 minutes.

“That was when we realized everything had changed on us,” Matt Caterer said of the sold-out performance. “We figured we'd play a show and it would be pretty cool. And when it sold out, we all had to stop and say, ‘Oh my God.’ Because up until then, [we] figured we'd play a show, and

maybe some people would show up and have a good time. But we didn't think that many people would care. But after that sold out, everything changed in our eyes."

The performance became a live DVD, then a reunion tour, then another leg of a reunion tour. Before long, the brothers began working on *Stay Down*, their first original studio material since *Destination Failure*. All the while, they made sure to channel every effort back through Chicago. Kellenberger had replaced original drummer Mike Felumlee for the comeback gig, but he later gave way to Ryan Chavez and ultimately to Neil Hennessy, who joined despite his full-time job in The Lawrence Arms. The band played high-profile slots at Lollapalooza 2006 and South By Southwest the following year, and toured throughout Illinois' Collar Counties, including its first stop in 15 years in Carpentersville, Ill. — the town where the Caterers got their start at a high school talent contest.

"I always had been aware of the Smoking Popes while growing up in the suburbs," said the 29-year-old Hennessy of his new band mates. "But at my first practice with them, I had a couple moments when I caught myself kind of in awe that I was playing with these guys, thinking, 'Holy shit, I'm playing songs like "Pasted" that I had heard so many times on mix tapes.'"

But it wasn't the old stuff that concerned Matt Caterer; it was the prospect of new tunes. After the Metro gig, he had set his sights less on dusting off his band's treasured catalog and began to focus on fresh tracks. Even with Josh Caterer's stabilized faith, the singer still was hesitant to perform some of his past songs. Yesterday's standards such as "Let's Hear it For Love" became late additions to the reformed group's set lists.

"Before, when things went bad, it all sort of was based around this fact that we were in this position, and we didn't want to blow it. But then we freaked out so much that we blew it," the bassist said. "But everything bad that could happen already had. So I had nothing to worry about as far as the band breaking up was concerned. As long as we put out something that was in the same ballpark as our first release, then I'd be 100 percent happy. But there's something about containing that spark that can carry you through the period where you made a bunch of albums together. If you put a bookend on it like we did and go on hiatus, you sort of close it off. And you might not be able to get it back."

What followed that reunion show was more than two years of recording and shopping what eventually would become *Stay Down*. The album finally was released on iTunes in June of

this year and hit stores in early August, despite being completed since fall 2007. Instead of writing about Jesus Christ, Josh Caterer had kept his word to his brother and turned his pen back toward the women in his life.

From "Stefanie" to "Little Jane-Marie," the band's Curb Appeal Records debut finds the songwriter fixating on day-to-day feelings in the same way that made him the poster child for '90s crushes. It's this tendency to sweat the small stuff that he lacked in Duvall. In that band, Josh abandoned his hyper-personal tales for big-picture questions, opting for proclamations of where he was emotionally, and not questioning how he got there. But in the Popes, the same lovesick fool that poetically crooned his way through those power-pop songs a decade ago reemerged.

Yet new tracks such as "The Corner" — written from the perspective of Perry Smith, the murderer immortalized in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* — show a darker side the band, as one of Josh Caterer's first acknowledgments that there might actually be something worse than falling out of love. A decade ago, the band would not have been ready to transition from the somber track to the album's more traditional guitar-pop numbers such as "Grab Your Heart and Run" or "Welcome to Janesville". It would have been too out of character. The sludgy guitars would not have meshed with the band's upbeat sets. Even five years ago, the lyricist would not have entertained the subject in one of his songs. Phrases such as, "And if I had another chance to live through that dark night/I would un-shoot every bullet one by one/ 'til the killing came undone" could have sent the new Christian down paths he wasn't ready to travel. It's taken more than 15 years — a decade since he found himself floundering on a California balcony — but these songs today are about a different type of regret.

"One of the best bands of our time [has] been found again," said Skiba of his friends' band. "The Smoking Popes show [this year] in L.A. was the first time a band made me cry since I can remember."

This type of emotional connection is why Skiba cites sharing the stage with Smoking Popes on New Year's Even 2006 at Metro as a career highlight that fulfilled a dream, and why he stops just short of admitting his hometown comrades still are his favorite band. The Alkaline Trio member discusses the Caterers with the same reverence as both Hennessy and Kellenberger, who each confessed that they always relished the times critics would compare their other bands with Smoking Popes.

"All the kids in bands that I meet say they looked to us as a fairly big influence. They say they look

to us in a way that would have you believe we should be bigger than we are," Matt Caterer said. "Well, bigger in places other than Chicago."

**"I drove all the way from Carpentersville/To see you here tonight/And it was worth it/You didn't play my favorite song/But that's all right/I love the new stuff, too/I'm just glad I got to see you." — Smoking Popes, "You Spoke to Me".**

**B**ack at the Belmont Arts & Music Festival in June, three men are waiting at the rear gate with their copies of *Stay Down*. Although the album isn't available in stores yet, it's being sold directly from the band at their concerts. As Hennessy walks by, the friends call the drummer over, track down a Sharpie marker, and ask for a signature.

"You know I don't play on this album, right?" Hennessy asks, double-checking that the fans knew he joined in May, after recording was finished.

"We know," chimes in one of the men who sang along in the front row to every song of the night's set. "But that's OK; The Lawrence Arms are great. And I've got all their other drummers' signatures, too. So I need yours."

At the same time, Josh Caterer watches the woman walk away down the wet street, carrying a bag stuffed with 24 of his band's T-shirts. He turns toward the stage and walks back to load his equipment into a van. The guys are preparing embark on a brief East Coast trek, and each of the members is making his final preparation before the tour. For the past few years, Josh Caterer has lived not far from where he grew up. The band might have moved away, but he'll always be a suburban guy at heart. He knows that now, and keeping that distinction has been key to the success of Smoking Popes' second go-round.

After packing up his guitar, the singer bids his mates goodnight, gets in his vehicle quietly and heads home, leaving his band in the city. In the morning, Smoking Popes will be waiting there for him, right where they belong — and Chicago will be, too.





# The Walkmen

Band of friends: The Walkmen's guide to surviving, barely

words by Nick Courtright  
photo by Randy Cremean

The Walkmen are the type of guys who offer you a beer when you walk into the room. They are the type who do things on their own, true do-it-yourselfers without a trace of pretense (or even the standard presence of a manager). And when the five childhood buddies stop for a chat in the rickety backroom lounge of Austin's Parish Room, they are disarmingly un-hot-shot, despite the fact that they've been stalwarts on the music scene for more than half a decade and just released a critically acclaimed album. All that, and two of them are fathers.

While much of this sounds like a childhood fantasy come true – “best friends who've known each other forever go on to tour the world as rock stars” – bassist and part-time keyboardist Walt Martin is quick to point out the shortcomings of such a situation.

“One of the drawbacks to us being such good friends [is that] it makes us sort of assume that somebody else is going to take care of everything,” he said. “But when it comes to actual leading, like making our band more successful or whatever, making the big decisions, nobody really wants to do it.”

And lead singer Hamilton Leithauser, a deceptively tall reed of a man who probably would appear from afar to be the band's most natural option for leadership, sheepishly agrees: “Nobody really *wants* to be the leader.”

All but one of the band members found themselves surviving the high school whirlpool of St. Albans, one of Washington, D.C.'s premier prep schools and the origin of an impressive list of famed alumni. The button-down nature of St. Albans provided the band with a less-than-textbook start to a rock 'n' roll career. Keyboardist and part-time bassist Pete Bauer, the one member of the band who attended public school, took it upon himself to introduce his buddies to all manner of vices.

“Cigarettes and beer ... I was so bad,” admits Bauer, proud that he sprung his friends from innocence. One-time bad influences aside, the band now holds true to a sort of old-school sense of responsibility and realism about the music business. And while band-family cohesion and having fun together are certainly on their list of assets, Leithauser, in a head-shaking half-sigh,

*“We all were very involved. I think this time we really wanted to make sure we were happy with everything.”*

**- Hamilton Leithauser**

mentions the inextinguishable fact that good times “don't pick up your bank account.”

But The Walkmen didn't need a boatload of dough to put together *You & Me*, their acclaimed fourth long-player. It's an album that marks a significant return to form after the tepidly-received *A Hundred Miles Off*. *You & Me* sees the band taking a newly dedicated approach to their music. Bauer confirmed this fact: “I think we definitely have cared about this record more [than previous records].”

“We all were very involved. I think this time we really wanted to make sure we were happy with everything,” Leithauser added.

The band opens up from the sunken-in couches of the lounge, acknowledging that this time around, the challenge of getting the order of songs just right was a particularly mind-bending experience.

“I've never talked about anything, or thought about anything, as much as track order,” Bauer said. To this declaration, Leithauser wryly added, “Yeah, and Pete has a child.”

Bauer's child is 3 years old, and drummer Matt Barrick has a 2-year-old. The hard and fast responsibilities of parenting are never far from the band.

“Actually, they're playing together right now,” Bauer said. Managing adulthood against the rock lifestyle offers its own particular challenges, “But really,” Bauer said, “it's not a bad job to have as a parent, because when you're home, you're home.”

While once upon a time it was simple to keep eyes focused on the fun and glamour of being a touring music act, Bauer remembers well the moment when his own goals were shifted into a new perspective.

“Finding out that you're going to be a father,” he recalled, his eyes widening, “is a terrifying time. I remember that being just about the most terrifying moment of my life. But it gets easier, after, you know, two or three years. But the first year and a half?” Reflecting on his own question, he only laughs.

In another nod to maturity, the band offered *You & Me* three weeks before its official release date for \$5 online, with all the proceeds going to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. The act was inspired by a friend's child being diagnosed with infant leukemia. Despite the band's kindness, they seem almost embarrassed to talk about the donation. Guitarist Paul Maroon gives only a slight smile when the topic comes up, as though the band, upon hearing about their friend's child, couldn't possibly have done anything else.

The flip side to giving proceeds away to charity is, of course, less money for the record label. But given The Walkmen's DIY approach to the business end of the industry, that arrangement is not terribly surprising. Leithauser, taking a deep breath as though he were preparing for an onslaught, gets to the root of this approach.

“We negotiated our own record contract and released our record,” he explained. “And getting our tour set up and going to Europe – we did it all ourselves. Pete books the horn players on Craigslist. We did all the things a manager would do. The problem is we can't imagine what else a manager would do. So, basically we don't know what we're doing at all,” he admitted after a pause. “I even get the T-shirts – it's a pain in the ass.”

While most groups eagerly enlist outside help to handle all the nonmusician details of being a band, The Walkmen have been running solo for quite a while.

“Yeah, I think it's just dawning on us that we probably should have [a manager],” Leithauser said, perhaps adding up all the time he spends on the ancillary aspects of bandhood.

In the end, though, that statement reflects the laid-back spirit of The Walkmen. As they develop as a band and their music becomes more refined, their critical chops and fan base grows. But never swells to an extent that fully allows them to break through into the mainstream hype.

“We're still schlepping,” Leithauser said almost proudly. “We're still trucking. We still put a lot of effort into it every day. And it hasn't paid off financially.”

To this, there's a chorus of groaning agreements from a group of men settling in for a long night – “No sir,” from one, “Not ... at ... all” from another.

But, really, they don't seem too terribly worried.

# On the Record with MY MORNING JACKET

words by Elliot Cole  
photos by Randy Cremean



The sun is beating down on the wheat-colored earth of Stubb's, the merciless Austin summer rays ricocheting off the ground and into the faces of 20 or so scattered children. The kids rest against the crowd barriers in front of the stage, a barrier that, unbeknownst to them, has absorbed the sweat of thousands of nights of performances. Today, however, it serves as the leaning post for a bunch of 10-to-12-year-olds, some kicking rocks, some vacantly day-dreaming, others chatting with friends in whispered, giggly conversations. They have just finished watching Louisville's My Morning Jacket soundcheck for the night's show, part of a Grammy-sponsored meet-and-greet that the band will do a handful of times on their current tour.

The kids are loosely organized in a semi-circle as the band comes out of their dressing room. They are shy (well, perhaps with the exception of an 11-year old girl wearing a T-shirt that reads "Sexy and Single"). The children – half from a local Boys & Girls Club, half from Austin's Paul Green School of Rock Music – snap pictures and are at first hesitant. But, as the timid questions sneak out, MMJ frontman Jim James (born James Olliges) fully engages the kids. He leans in to each one, walking over to hear them better and bringing an unmistakable air of encouraging positivity. He emphasizes the fun aspects of his job and the power of music, responding thoughtfully to each question as though it were the most important thing he had ever been asked.

Slowly, the kids warm up to the band, and the questions start to roll out.

"Do you ever get nervous?" asks a long-haired future rocker, and the band cites the nerves they had before playing *Saturday Night Live* and *Late Show with David Letterman*.

"Do you play covers?" another asks, and the band offers a coy "sometimes" (no word on whether the kids would be familiar with James Brown or Velvet Underground, just two of the artists that MMJ has recently covered). One kid explains that he has his own band and needs advice for booking and touring. "Eat healthy," replies James before explaining a honey/lemon juice concoction he brews up to keep his voice strong. By the end of the session, James is professing his love for *The Muppet Show*, claiming that it "was the first thing that I found that made me want to be a musician."

This is, in a nutshell, Jim James. He is endearingly honest; at times on his own planet, at times

immediately *there*, with penetrating eyes and a warm smile. He doesn't so much take over a room as allow the energy of the room to wrap around him. Above all else, his passion is the underlying theme of his demeanor. A few days later, James elaborates on the session, his upbeat nature becoming an almost tangible force.

"I think it's really important for kids to find something that they love," he says. "It doesn't have to be music; it can be anything. It can be sports or writing or art ... something that's not the TV and something that's not the Internet that kids can invest themselves in and really start to define themselves and start to have a clear and beautiful reason to be a part of the world."

James already knows his clear and beautiful reason to be here. Music encompasses him; it's the foundation for all of his resolute passion, the proverbial air around him. And, as he breathes in the stuffy Austin air with a smile, it becomes clear that he fully appreciates each passing moment.

***"I mean, music for me is religion. It is spirituality. It's the thing that really fuels me."***

**– Jim James**

The night after the Q and A, My Morning Jacket plays an extensive, monumental set, ranging from poignant to sweat-saturated and primal. Days later, James is still feeling the aftermath of the strenuous performance. MMJ is touring by itself – the shows are promoted as "An Evening With My Morning Jacket" – meaning no openers, no wasted time, and no frills. The 28-song, three-hour set at Stubb's is not an anomaly: the tour is thoroughly exhausting, an enterprise that would be too demanding for most bands. Throw in the fact that MMJ is widely regarded as one of the highest-octane live performances in rock, and it's understandable that James is a bit tired. James himself admits that the night-in, night-out energy required to put on such a draining show can wear him out. "It really does. I try to keep up with it. I'm feeling kinda weird," he explains. "The show ... almost fucking killed me."

If the ensuing dehydration of Austin's show almost killed him, then the performance in Iowa City had him strapped to his deathbed. James, seven songs into the set, suffered "traumatic" injuries to his torso after stumbling offstage. The crash landing necessitated an immediate trip to the hospital, shelving the band's touring plans for weeks (along with a Barack Obama fundraising solo set).

MMJ doesn't have to do this. The band isn't required to play three-hour sets or exhaust itself on tour. Even the greediest of fans would understand if the group took a little bit of time to relax, maybe a break or just few extra days off. But MMJ can't stop. My Morning Jacket is, after all, an ever-changing mechanism of music. They are the band that simply can't stay put.

When describing his outfit, James uses the words "lucky" and "fortunate" a *lot*. It's almost as though he's expecting to be pinched – that somehow, MMJ, despite its recent stability, is all just a dream.

"I've been really fortunate," says James, who is somehow both engagingly upbeat and notably weary. "We've all been really fortunate, the band, to be able to make a living playing music."

Maybe he feels this way because MMJ hasn't always had clear sailing. It's been a decade since Jim James founded the group, and the current lineup – featuring guitarist Carl Broemel, drummer Patrick Hallahan, bassist "Two-tone" Tommy, and keyboardist Bo Koster – has been together for almost four years. But, before this stability, there were bumps along the way. Original guitarist Johnny Quaid and keyboardist Danny Cash both left the band in 2004 (their reasons are generally attributed to, not surprisingly, "exhaustion"). Whereas this could have made for the potential end of the band, James pressed on. But, then again, that's what MMJ is best at.

After 1999's critically acclaimed debut *The Tennessee Fire*, the band was unfairly pigeonholed as lo-fi good ol' boys from Kentucky, a band with an alt-country sound loaded in southern-soaked tendencies. The band's mastery of the empty space on the record gained attention, and, above it all, was James. His haunting, ethereal vocals were draped over every measure like tense silk, stretched out over resonating notes of reverb.

But the band's subsequent releases shed a different light on the group. They branched out in a transformative prowess, enabling the group to prove that it was more than met the eye. In the public sphere, MMJ went from southern hippies to a perennial indie powerhouse, a band that was able to morph into whatever shape it chose. The folk fans caught on, as did the jam band die-hards. The hippies, the indie kids, and the metal-heads all latched on in their own respective ways. (Any MMJ performance will host a veritable hodgepodge of a crowd.)

*At Dawn* brought a braver sense of songwriting, from the seamless addition of keyboards to their previously stark sound to a general expansion of the band's established rock sensibilities, from jam to psychedelic. But it was 2005's *Z* that provided a glimpse into the worldly eclecticism



of MMJ, ditching the reverb-drenched guitars of *The Tennessee Fire* for a polished, ambient, dub/R&B flavor. It was, at the time, MMJ's most artistically courageous album yet – further pushing the envelope and separating the band from expectations.

Broemel – who is reserved in crowds but, interpersonally, very businesslike and articulate – has a rationale for why each release is so independent of the rest.

“We kind of live in our own bubble,” he explains. “We make music together, we hang out together. When we record the record, we try not to think too much about, like, what’s gonna happen with it. We just try to focus all our energy on making the album, and whatever kind of inspiration or whatever we have at that point is all focused into one point. [We are] not really thinking about the other records. While we’re actually in the process, we do a pretty good job of ignoring the rest of the universe.”

The universe, on the other hand, is having a hard time ignoring My Morning Jacket, particularly their constant remodeling. The underlying themes with each release became more and more clear: MMJ is an animal of transformation, a band that relishes an organic makeover from record to record. When asked what inspires the band to be so ever-changing and adaptive, Broemel adds, “I think collectively, we are [wired that way]. A lot of that inspiration comes from Jim. When he says we’re going on tour or we’ll make a record, it’s like ‘OK, this is where Jim’s at, let’s try to figure it out together.’ ”

***“It’s almost like we’re constantly building this big thing, this big creature of all our past songs, and when a new record comes out, it’s like the latest features we’re trying to put on the creature.”***

**– Jim James**

*Evil Urges* makes for the most recent appendage to the transformative creature that is My Morning Jacket’s discography. It further capitalizes on the far-reaching ambition of *Z*, but the album carries its own identity. The tracks are some of the most daring material the band has even written, both for their sonic breadth (see the Prince-like vocals of “Highly Suspicious” or the evocative Theremin of “Touch Me I’m Going

to *Scream*, Pt. 2”) as well as the way they were composed.

It should come as no surprise by now: the band tried doing things differently this time around.

“It just feels right to approach things different[ly] every time,” says Broemel, acknowledging the band’s aversion to redundancy. “Do we want to go back to old Louisville and rent the same house [that] we did for *Z*? Probably not – let’s go do something; we have the opportunity to go somewhere else. We went to Colorado this time and holed up in this really cool studio outside of Colorado Springs and did our isolation thing there. Jim had the great idea: instead of staying isolated for the actual record, we’d go to New York City. And that was a totally different feel. Just waking up in New York City, you know, and having to deal with New York City every day, was so different than anything we’ve done before.”

It’s almost as though the band is searching for a muse, reaching for the environments and activities that will drive them even further from creative static. Moving from the peaceful realm of Colorado to the honking business of New York isn’t a problem for MMJ, and the resulting album is sophisticated in its variability.

Of course, there is an inherent problem with constantly changing: the fans that cling to a particular album want you to stay that way. This has, in a way, made *Evil Urges* a divisive record, whether James and company realize it or not. James doesn’t seem flustered by the fact that people take their time in warming up to each album, but he doesn’t seem overly eager to talk about it, either.

“I, seriously, after awhile, just don’t really give a shit,” he admits. “Of course I would love it if everybody in the whole world likes it. But I know that is impossible. And it doesn’t matter who puts out a record, there’s always people that don’t like it, and there’s always people that like it. I found that liberating ... At the end of the day, I have to defend it, and I have to play it every night, and I’ve got to live with it. And the guys in the band do, too. So the most important thing is that we’re happy with it, and we feel like it stands on its own two feet and we can live with it.”

Both James and Broemel deny that they ever saw *Evil Urges* as a “divisive” record for their fan base. Indeed, it might not be folksy enough for the folk fans, not indie enough for the snobs, not heavy enough for the metal-heads, and not jammy enough for the hippies. But, somehow, it’s all these things at once, and more. It’s a representation of every genre they’ve delved into as well as a creative reaching for more. As for James, it’s just another addition to their creature.

“Hopefully, knock on wood, if we’re lucky enough to keep living and keep making music, it’ll be just another notch on the totem pole – in a good way,” he explains, before adding the obvious: “I’m already thinking about the next record.”

***“They’re an amazing band. What they do is unlike anybody else right now. It’s bringing something new, but it’s also adding something old. It’s just wonderful.”***

**– Steve, first in line for My Morning Jacket’s Austin City Limits taping**

For the band that never sleeps, Austin has yet another performance waiting. Home to PBS’s long-running *Austin City Limits* program, MMJ has been asked for a return performance to the program (a rarity). But Terry Lickona – producer and the man who, for the better part of the program’s 34-season run, has hand-picked the performers – makes it seem as though he didn’t even have a choice.

“Sounds like a cliché, but I was just so blown away by the new music and the sense of adventure that seemed to be behind the music,” says the active, engaging, and pale-skinned Lickona, who ranks high on the “who’s who of Austin” scale. “It just seemed like the time was right to have them come back. And beyond that, as another indication of how excited I was about it, I just – on the spot – offered them the full hour show, which is also something we don’t do very often.”

James, who always seems in touch with each pivotal childhood musical memory, gleams with excitement when recalling the smoky studios.

“One of my first childhood memories of seeing music was seeing Johnny Cash on *Austin City Limits*,” he says giddily. “It’s like one of those magic things. It’s like church or something. It’s cool for a band to go out there and just play. You just do what you do.”

And, on this night, MMJ does what they do to perfection. Having previously played to a packed, large-scale venue at Stubbs, it’s impressive to see the band adjust to the intimacy of the

*"I don't ever want this to be me and a bunch of hired guns who don't give a shit. I want the guys to feel like they get to put their heart and soul into it, too, because that makes it more important - because they care about it, and they're out there sweating and playing their fucking hearts out. It's their music, too."*

- Jim James



small *ACL* studio. The soft lighting drapes over James as he passionately wails through another thick set.

Afterward, the band meets with Lickona in one of the studio's dressing rooms. The walls are lined with pictures of the show's past: the likes of Willie Nelson, Lyle Lovett, Ray Charles, and Elvis Costello. The band situates itself in front of the camera, visibly exhausted from the show as an *ACL* worker dabs on bits of makeup. But, as soon as Lickona starts interviewing the group, they light up. Hallahan's booming voice and disarming smile echo through the room, while James' ever-present sense of passionate sincerity occupies the camera. And, as the band talks about their new album in the confines of the brightly lit dressing room, you can't help but wonder when their own picture will be hanging on the walls.

***"I don't know, it just feels right. I don't think it's an intentional, 'We've gotta mix it up and we've gotta freak everybody out'; it's more like, 'Well that didn't feel right; let's do something else.'"***

**— Carl Broemel**

After playing the role of teacher to kids, performing a thoroughly exhausting set (twice), and doing the various interviews, photo shoots, and soundchecks that are required of them on this stop, it's amazing that My Morning Jacket has anything left to give. But the band will wake up tomorrow morning, and, somehow, muster the energy to do it all over again.

The creature of MMJ does have a heart, a pumping vessel that breathes life into the most weary of bodies. It's the drive and passion of James, his infectious obsession with music that only can be described as "devout".

"Ninety percent of every day, I live is wrapped up in music in some way, [from] thinking about it to listening to it to playing it or writing it," he says, and it shows. When not playing legendary three-and-a-half-hour sets at Bonnaroo, learning covers of his favorite artists, or thinking of his next album, James even manages to slip in a few solo sets.

"I do the solo things because I just love performing, and that kinda takes me back to the way a



song starts for me, which is just really an acoustic guitar and my voice or a piano or something," James elaborates. "I kind of like performing that way because it's just a different way of performing."

In short, it's just another way to absorb and create music, but James is quick to point out that he would never forego the band concept for the solo route.

"I don't ever want this to be me and a bunch of hired guns who don't give a shit. I want the guys to feel like they get to put their heart and soul into it, too, because that makes it more important — because they care about it, and they're out there sweating and playing their fucking hearts out. It's their music, too."

And the music — the soulful resonance wrapping itself around the group's ever-changing foundation — is the result of James' sponge-like sensibilities. He genuinely is a student of sound, someone who admits that he tries to "digest as much music as possible." It's his lifeblood, a sort of sacred religion.

"For me, I don't know what is more spiritual. I think even people that go to church will tell you most of the time that the most spiritual thing about church is the music and the movement."

The gospel of music pulses through James's veins, and it is the root of the "creature" that MMJ has become. The band will wake up tomorrow and play another strenuous set, do more draining extra-curriculars, and battle more stage wounds and sickness ... and they'll do it with a fervor and a smile that is what music *should* be about in the first place. Above all, they'll continue to strive artistically in ways that nobody can possibly expect.

"I just hope I'm lucky enough to stay healthy, to keep going, and make more records," says a humbled James, deflecting speculation over what the band's career could hold. As for what MMJ is ultimately reaching for, perhaps he himself doesn't even know. And, for the ever-changing Louisville band that has transformed from southern-typecast hippies to bona fide rock stars, maybe it's even better that way.





# MOTH!FIGHT!

## & the Ghosts of American History



words by Carly Kocurek  
photos by Randy Cremean

In a book so referenced it has become a cliché, Greil Marcus claims that the hook of Bob Dylan’s basement tapes is a glimpse backward to an “old, weird America” that doesn’t exist anymore. That book, which initially was titled *Invisible Republic* but now goes by its aforementioned catch phrase, argues that Dylan’s tapes resurrected the feeling – the utter weirdness – of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*. The argument has been accused of being racist (maybe) and nostalgic (definitely), but it taps into the way myth and meaning-making can circulate in American popular music. Although the members of Moth!Fight! have jokingly claimed they produce “steampunk music” and that their sound is miles away from Smith’s folk anthology, the real inspiration seems to be something of that old, weird America.

The notion of a mythological America explains why Abraham Lincoln blends in easily with the White Rabbit and Little Red Riding Hood. It also explains why, when I sit down with Moth!Fight! members Kevin Adickes and Jessica Boettger, one of the first things we wind up talking about is the Great Molasses Flood of 1919. The flood was an incident in which a molasses tank in Boston’s North End burst and sent thousands of gallons of syrup rushing through the streets at 35 miles an hour, killing 21 people and injuring another 150.

“America has this set of hidden mythologies that are true, but you’d never believe them,” Boettger says. “I think we have a certain fascination with fairytales and things that sound like fairytales because they’re so unlikely.”

It’s those things that sound like fairytales like the Brothers Grimm, that enchant Moth!Fight! in general, and Adickes in particular. After the Molasses Flood, we move on to the Tri-State Tornado of 1925, the deadliest tornado in U.S. history, which ripped across Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana, killing nearly 700 people. And, finally, Adickes brings up H.H. Holmes and his monstrous hotel. Holmes, America’s first serial killer, opened a hotel as a very carefully set death trap during the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair – the story is the inspiration for Erik Larson’s nonfiction work *The Devil in the White City*.

The purpose of these kinds of narratives are multiple. They titillate and terrify, awe and inspire, sure – but they also provide a means of working through the sorts of issues most people deal with on a day-to-day basis. In the grisly tale of H.H. Holmes and his hotel lurks a host of anxieties about the city; in that of the Molasses Flood, we can see uneasiness about industrialization and the effect of potentially corrupt and irresponsible corporations. These are larger-than-life happenings, the makings of nightmares and fantasies – or at least good cocktail banter.

**“America has this set of hidden mythologies that are true but you’d never believe them. I think we have a certain fascination with fairytales, and things that sound like fairytales because they’re so unlikely.”**

- Jessica Boettger

**“After living in the house, I started hearing a little girl’s voice. I don’t believe in ghosts; I’m sure it was a hallucination or sleep paralysis... Our album is, if nothing else, trying to articulate the experiences we had during that period of time.”**

**- Kevin Adickes**

Adickes’s historical fixations may seem far afield from the band’s music, but they aren’t. Boettger jokes about Adickes’s obsession with “freakish American historical events,” but he isn’t alone; not in American popular music, at least. Moth!Fight! seem to be hovering around that same sort of mythology – grisly at some turns, sweet at others – that has inspired acts from the Carter Family to the Handsome Family.

However, Moth!Fight! has a sound that would have been technologically inaccessible to the former and is far-removed from the peculiar folk leanings of the latter. Instead, the sound is a kind of eerie pastiche, with chimes and orchestral instruments mixed with tape loops, child-like harmonies, and blasts of noise. It sounds as though someone took early radio broadcasts and cut them into a live performance by Mates of State and Belle and Sebastian.

“We like to use as many things as we can to make music,” Boettger says, to which Adickes adds, “It’s maximalism. We haven’t learned the joy of sparseness yet.”

And, while it’s true that the sound is dense, it’s due more to a multitude of layers than to a wall-of-sound effect. Even though Moth!Fight! have not followed the murder-ballad route of the Handsome Family or even Nick Cave, there is something pervasively creepy about much of their music. This is owed in part to the upcoming album’s inspiration, a series of ghostly encounters Adickes had in the house he shares with Boettger in Austin.

“After living in the house, I started hearing a little girl’s voice,” Adickes says. “I don’t believe in ghosts; I’m sure it was a hallucination or sleep paralysis.”

Regardless of cause, though, the experiences – including an incident in which Adickes was convinced a ghostly girl was perched on his chest as he lay in bed – stuck and became part of the band’s own set of terrifying tales and archetypal characters.

“Our album is, if nothing else, trying to articulate the experiences we had during that period of time,” Adickes explains.

As for the songwriting process, Boettger says it is collaborative but often based on Adickes’s oddball fascinations: “Kevin just lets himself be haunted, and the rest just comes together.”

Those haunted songs make the core of the album, which Moth!Fight! began recording last April. They finished up in October, a fitting season for a record that obsesses over things ghostly and wondrous. Tracks such as “Hopscotch” take the sing-song cadence of children’s games and rhymes and merges it with hysterical sound and more familiar instrumentation, creating something swirling and nearly as hard to pin down as a specter. The process at the album’s center, the impulse to recount and perhaps even make sense of incidents that fall well outside the realm of daily life, is an impulse behind many myths. That same impulse also is behind much folklore, which tries to explain the unexplainable and render the weird into something intelligible.

These attempts, however, seem to inevitably fall short – which is why things that have passed both into folklore and into more staid historical accounts can continue to unnerve and captivate. It’s why, for example, the Great Molasses Flood of 1919, which easily could be reduced to a tale of structure failure and corporate greed, still triggers horror and fascination in 2008. It’s also why Moth!Fight!, a band removed both by generations and by musical leanings, can draw on the same sludge of American myth Greil Marcus saw at the back of the Harry Smith anthology.



# The Many Men of **MAN MAN**



words by Elliot Cole  
photos by Randy Cremean

**T**hey look like a bastard hybrid of drunken sailors and carnival operators; their matching white shirts are subdued by exotic makeup, beards, mustaches, and sweat-drenched hair. This much is apparent: the many men of Man Man are wholly devoted to their utterly incomparable live show, a performance that is a blend of spastic histrionics, wailing group vocals, and chaotic instrument changes. They flail and convulse on stage while pounding out the manic cacophony that has solidified their reputation as a can't-miss act. Their similarly sweating, howling, and devoted fan base gyrates in response. It becomes clear that Man Man is more than just a band: it's a passion.

Singer/pianist Ryan Kattner, with a straight-forward and disarming demeanor, introduces himself appropriately enough: 'Hey, I'm Ryan, nice to meet you,' et cetera. But in terms of the six-piece from Philadelphia (or "Killadelphia," according to the band), Kattner goes by the pseudonym Honus Honus. And he's not the only one with an alias: Christopher Powell is Pow Pow, Russell Higbee is Cougar, Christopher Shar is Sergei Sogay, and Billy Dufala is Chang Wang. The strange part about the monikers isn't the names themselves (somehow, it seems oddly suitable for the unpredictable band). The strange part is that you can't tell where one identity ends and the other starts. The band's stage personas and their real ones are essentially the same.

"I feel like we do our own thing," mutters the long-bearded multi-instrumentalist Sergei Sogay, providing a phrase that easily could serve as the band's mission statement. As the group members prepare for their show, they look like calm and poised veterans of the tour circuit. But as their set unfurls, the band unravels into a collective, controlled bedlam, bellowing and leaping around the stage like trapped zoo animals. There is no verbal banter with the audience: Man Man is possessed, leaving a trail of frenzied sounds in its wake. The group does, unequivocally, do its own thing, from its nearly indefinable sound (Viking-vaudeville? Three-ring experimental indie rock? Manic gypsy jazz?) to an unmatched live presence. A band more dedicated to their craft would be hard to find.

When talking about their live show, Honus Honus, with a smirk, claims that the band is "trying to see if Russell can spontaneously combust on stage." Russell aka Cougar, in retort, offers that "they don't know ... that I'm going to shoot lasers out of my eyes at any moment."

Yes, Man Man is weird. (What other band would list "boar-hunting expeditions" as a musical influence?) But that mischievous and good-humored identity is exactly what makes the band work. The trick about Man Man is that, as much as a shtick as the band might appear to be, their novel sense of musical showmanship and wacky personalities come naturally for the group.

"We're like that in band practice, too. We just can't help ourselves," says the grinning Cougar.

Sure enough, their collective humor and ability to not take

themselves too seriously comes through in their music. *Rabbit Habits*, the follow-up to 2006's acclaimed *Six Demon Bag*, is a balance of poignant expressiveness and bizarre eccentricity wrapped in a package of honky tonk pianos, drunken horns, dancing xylophones and relentless percussion on everything from traditional drums to pots and pans. Write Man Man off as a joke band at your own peril: the music is a variable that holds everything together. They can be affecting (as was the case on fan-favorite "Van Helsing Boombox"); play hyperactive, blue-tipped pop ("Mister Jung Stuffed"); or bring out the countless other sounds in their repertoire, from rock to jazz, all coated in the glass-throat vocals of Honus Honus.

The band's eclecticism undoubtedly is its strength, and Man Man does well to preserve the novelty of their range.

"Hopefully it doesn't become a thing where people expect to hear a Man Man song sound like a Man Man song," says Sergei Sogay, referring to what makes *Rabbit Habits* unique. "I'd like to think that we're not painting ourselves into a corner. I'd like to think that there are surprises on this record that are different than things that have been done within our band." True to form, fireworks and barking dogs make appearances on the album, among other recording experiments.

With *Rabbit Habits*, the band makes it apparent that they are just as dedicated to their sound as they are the presentation of it. The album has new melodies, rhythm changes, and a glossy production that Man Man has never had before.

"I think we put just as much importance on our recordings as we do on our live show," Honus Honus says. You don't want to short change one or the other. At the end of the day, more people are going to hear your record than ever see your live show."

Honus Honus understands that the band's multi-faceted sound would lend itself to some raised eyebrows, but he emphasizes that, lyrically, Man Man is a very personal platform.

"I don't think people would stick around if there wasn't some substance to the songs ... if we were just spouting out shit, I don't think it would really impact on a personal level. We're not singing about 'Don't eat the yellow snow.'"

He explains his lyrical substance as a personal "mish-mash," claiming that, "There's like, abstract stuff, there's personal stuff about me and other people; about *Teen Wolf*. There has to be some connection to it."

Honus Honus says their dedication to their performance—transforming it from a show to an experience—has been present since "day one." Sergei Sogay echoes the sentiment: "It's just kind of something that all of us feel. That's kind of how I always presented myself in my old bands, and so did Pow Pow. When we all came together, we had those personalities already."

The commitment and passion toward the identity of Man Man is astonishing, but, while their show is what packs the venues, Sergei Sogay reminds us that Man Man is as devoted to the quality of their sound as to the eccentricities of the band.

"You can see a lot of people singing along, too," he smiles.

And, for a group wholly devoted to their unparalleled sound and image, there will be a lot more to come.



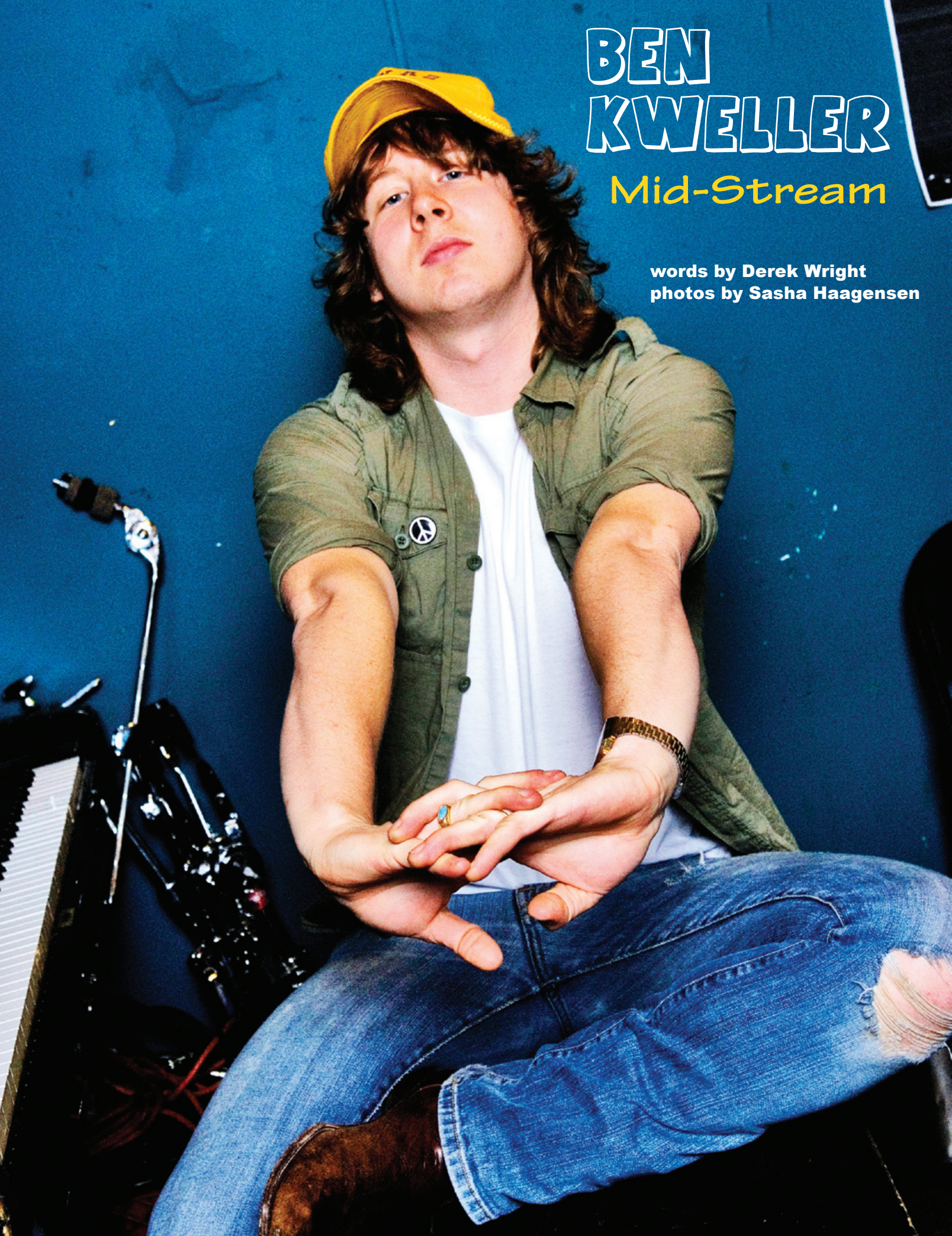
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# BEN KWELLER

## Mid-Stream

words by Derek Wright  
photos by Sasha Haagensen



It's two hours before Ben Kweller's Chicago gig in mid-October, but the singer still has quite a bit to do.

With sound check having just wrapped up, he has a pair of interviews to squeeze in between dinner and a meeting with the band to determine the evening's play list. The January release of his fourth solo LP, *Changing Horses*, is a few months away, and the media blitz is scheduled to intensify during upcoming East Coast stops. It makes this Chicago date the perfect juncture to shore up any questions that the hired musicians still might have about the songs and work out any quirks in the set's flow.

But first, the 27-year-old father has an on-stage appointment for a nightly jam session. Positioning himself behind a piano, he launches into a Las Vegas-lounge version of the Steve Miller Band's song "The Joker." Almost immediately, Dorian Kweller – Ben's 2-year-old son who has sneaked into place behind the drum kit, which he can barely see over – begins to pound away, keeping a beat all his own.

"We jam all the time. [Dorian] loves it," Kweller said. "He's been on a tour bus since he was 4 months old. Ever since then, he's been fascinated by the drums. [My wife] Liz says he needs his one hour of drumming to recalibrate, to redo his brain after his nap."

Given that he's been up since 7 a.m., a nap also might have been ideal for the night's headliner, not just his son. But raising a toddler has made the singer accustomed to sleepless days. And a son with a passion for music – particularly the drums – is something Kweller is even more familiar with, having learned to play from his own father at about the same age.

Not much is different throughout the Kweller family tree. As a child, Ben used to pal around with his dad's friend, then-Bruce Springsteen band mate Nils Lofgren. Today, Dorian Kweller has found himself standing knee-high backstage with the likes of Brendan Benson and Local H's Scott Lucas. It's an upbringing consistent with his father's, surprisingly orchestrated by an artist with such affinity for change. The theme often has been explored in Kweller's music. In songs such as "Run", "I Gotta Move", "Penny on the Track", "On My Way", "Living Life", and "My Apartment", the singer romanticizes the idea of flux, singing of its necessity and praising its cathartic capabilities. This constant restlessness inspired *How You Lookin' Southbound? Come In ...*, a 2008 EP dedicated to truck drivers and intended to be a cross-country soundtrack.

"Change is always happening," Kweller explained. "On the road [you can] connect with people you don't know, people who you thought you'd never meet. On the road, it's like, everybody has their own mission, but you can reach out and talk to people who all understand why you're on the road, too."

The hyperactive yet laid-back performer has had an increased share of change of late. After two solo albums on ATO, *Changing Horses* came realistically close to not being released on his long-time label, had it not been saved by late negotiations. The album, produced by

"Change is always happening. On the road [you can] connect with people you don't know, people who you thought you'd never meet. On the road, it's like, everybody has their own mission, but you can reach out and talk to people who all understand why you're on the road, too."



“I believe in astrology, and us Geminis can’t make up our minds about anything. It’s good because we see both sides of every situation and we’re always looking to find new things, but it’s bad because sometimes we want stuff to keep changing for us no matter what.”



Our Lady Peace guitarist Steve Mazur, also marks Kweller’s first solo output not recorded primarily in New York City. Having spent almost a decade there after leaving the guitar-pop ensemble Radish, he recently relocated his family back to his Texas roots.

“Me and Liz really have created a world of our own. ... We kinda feel like we’re this gypsy family. If I had to stay in the same place constantly, I’d get a little stir crazy,” said Kweller of his life’s many moving pieces. “For an outsider, [the album’s title] will seem like a reference to the genre shift to country and western. And it is about that, too, because I know that I’m mixing it up on people.”

If conventional wisdom warns against making any drastic changes mid-stream – or in this case, mid-career – *Changing Horses* is a defiant recording, tempting age-old clichés. With some tracks dating to his high school days, it’s the album that Kweller claims he has been waiting to make for more than 13 years. Less autobiographical than his other records, the 10 songs are a collection of eccentric characters and heavy subjects. Opener “Gypsy Rose”, which is based loosely on Kweller’s father-in-law, tells of a man whose only relationship is with a local prostitute. “Sawdust Man” is the story of a lonely carpenter waiting for his lover to return home. The record’s closing number, “Homeward Bound”, continues this fascination with travel and examines the solitary life of a drug addict. The song “On Her Own” is about a fictitious female lead, while “The Ballad of Wendy Baker” – written by a then-teenage Kweller – is the true story his friend’s death in a car crash.

Musically, the record marks a shift, too. Gone are the jumpy piano tracks and fuzzy guitar licks that once had drawn comparisons to Ben Folds and Weezer, respectively. Instead, *Changing Horses* finds the songs steeped in steel guitar, honky-tonk piano, and thigh-slapping acoustic guitars. Kweller’s deceptively casual drawl now sounds a little thicker, and the cowboy boots that always looked like an ironic fashion nod to his upbringing are all too fitting.

“I’m getting tired of some of my older solo stuff,” Kweller said. “I feel I outgrew a lot of that stuff years ago – lyrically, certainly. I don’t really like playing a lot of the stuff off [2002’s] *Sha Sha* or even [2004’s] *On My Way*, so I don’t anymore. Some songs like ‘Falling’ I still love, but a lot of my older music just doesn’t really represent who I am or what I feel anymore.”

Who he is today is a performer at a turning point. If 2006’s self-titled LP was the proverbial quarter-life crisis, then this is the Ben Kweller who emerged. Having grown tired of the same New York flaws that had inspired him for so long, he’s an artist less interested in finding himself and more focused on discovering everyone else. He’s a man willing to put his family on a bus and leave their home behind for months at a time. But he’s also the same person who just moved 1,700 miles so that his son could be closer to his grandparents. If anything, he’s the stereotypical Gemini – a talkative entertainer with little more than a moment’s attention span, with a personality equally split between transient and stationary.

“I believe in astrology, and us Geminis can’t make up our minds about anything,” Kweller said. “It’s good because we see both sides of every situation and we’re always looking to find new things, but it’s bad because sometimes we want stuff to keep changing for us no matter what.”

Some things, however, will stay the same regardless of how much time passes – such as the lonesome appeal of a boozy country song, or a father taking time out each day to help his son learn to play the drums.



# The Veils

Music to make love  
and possibly even  
build a fort to

words by Caitlin Caven  
photos by Drew Reynolds



There is a massive, stadium-rock-style tour bus parked on Walnut Street, just outside of Philadelphia's World Café Live. It's hard not to do a double take: World Café Live is as much a restaurant as it is a venue, and its clientele tends to skew more toward National Public Radio than My Chemical Romance. It's not a "Philly, are you ready to ROCK?" kind of place, and curiosity aimed at the giant bus breaks people's dispassionate inner-city expressions as they walk by.

The vehicle belongs to London-based The Veils, who share it with tourmate Liam Finn. Inside, it has a table where guitarist Dan Raishbrook and drummer Henning Dietz sit; several bunks that save the band members the trouble of finding hotels; and, in the far back, a living room area. This room is the designated smoking quarters, and singer/guitarist Finn Andrews and bassist Sophia Burn roll cigarettes as they discuss topics ranging from Will Smith to Waffle Houses.

Andrews' languid deadpan is the yin to Burn's rapid-fire yang, and the configuration of their rapport lends a creative context to their music. 2006's *Nux Vomica* – their last release and the only album with The Veils' current line-up – is an affecting mix of sweetness, gravel-throated ferocity, lullaby moments, and lurking menace. The band has just finished recording a new album and, mere days after wrapping it, flew to the U.S. for their second-ever full U.S. tour. Philadelphia, where this interview takes place, is the band's second stop.

**Soundcheck Magazine:** Tell me about the environment of recording this album. From reading Sophia's album production blog, it sounds like you were just in confined spaces with each other, isolated, with a lot of madness floating around. Was that the case?

**Finn Andrews:** Yeah, it was a tiny, little wooden room. Um, with just instruments.

**Sophia Burn:** It was, it was weird. The thing with it was, the room was small, but also getting outside was kind of an issue, 'cause there were like four doors and once you were outside, you had to ring buzzers to get back in. So it was like, we'd never really go outside during the day – so you'd never really wander off. You'd just sit in, like, one of two little rooms. So it was really, really contained.

**FA:** Yeah, like 15-hour days.

**SB:** (Laughs) 15-hour days. ... And we did a lot of Internet. (Laughs)

**SM:** Did you start to break with reality a little?

**FA:** I think we just adapted to so much of the time spent in tiny spaces with each other. I feel quite weird being outdoors these days. (Chuckles)

**SB:** Yeah, it's true. We didn't go nearly as mad as we could've. We kept substance abuse to a minimum.

**FA:** We were very focused on what we were doing, I think. I'm easily distracted. We did the last album in L.A. – I don't know if you've ever spent any time there before – but there was a lot of, just, kind of, running off and looking around, rather than making the record. And this time we wanted to do it really quickly, 'cause the last time ended up taking a really long time because of running off into the hills—

**SB:** Going off to the supermarket and coming back four hours later. (Chuckles)

**FA:** So this time, we just did it like 10 minutes up the road from where we live. In a really nothing part of town, it's just this industrial estate. And we just locked ourselves in a room for three and a half weeks and we just did it. It was my dad's advice, actually, because he was, like, researching where you're going to make records, and there's all these incredibly beautiful—

**SB:** Beautiful—

**FA:** Beautiful places, hotels, studios, all over the world ... incredible ... like one in upstate New York, in the Catskills, in these nice Gothic mansions. And it all sounds amazing. But you spend a fortune and then get so distracted by everything that's going on around it. So my dad's advice was just to record somewhere cheap and then go on holiday afterwards. It's good advice. (Chuckles)

**SM:** That's great advice. So did you?

**SB:** So we did! Well, here we are. We finished [the record] Friday last, and got on the plane on Wednesday. I mean, it was bizarre – like last night, just getting on a stage and playing live – it felt so weird. After being in such a, kind of, enclosed space, it felt very odd.

**SM:** The band is based in London, but you two grew up in New Zealand; Henning is German; and you tour extensively. Your MySpace page has all these great comments in either broken English or other languages. Given all this globe-spanning, do you notice marked differences in your various international fan bases?

**SB:** Massively so.

**FA:** Yes. Everywhere, everywhere we go is completely different. Never thought it'd be the case before. You don't really think of that.

**SB:** It's really weird wondering how it happens. Like over here, and like Australia and New Zealand, the crowds are a lot younger. Though, I mean, we do get our share of older types.

**FA:** America's amazing because it's such a huge

place and we've never touched it. You know, we've never played here before last year, really. Everywhere we went, we had no clue if anyone'd turn up at all, you know? Which is like terrifying, but also really exciting when – there were some incredible [experiences]. We went to Montreal and played this festival, and we were on this little stage and kind of tucked away in the corner, and we were like, "OK, this is going to be a bit shit, isn't it?" And like two minutes before we went on and there were like three people kind of spread out, standing around. And we were like, "OK, we'll just go on and play." And like the second we went on, actually like twelve hundred people just, kind of stormed the stage. And everyone knew the songs, they were singing along – and we'd never played in Montreal in our lives.

**SB:** It was so weird!

**FA:** It was so cool, just knowing that something had been building there without – you hadn't done a thing. It's just that your music had found its way there. It's so exciting ...

**SB:** It's kind of funny as well, because you get a real sense for what culture – I guess, cultures of people are like from fans. Like we play Italy, and it's very Italian, like – you know, you get a lot of real, people shouting stuff that you don't know what it is, but it sounds very heartfelt. (Laughs) And then they come up to you after and like grab you and are like, "I must buy you a drink!" and you're like, "OK, cool!" (Laughs) And then, you know, we go to Holland, and everyone is – everyone is really nice, but very, kind of, earnest and, like, calm—

**FA:** I haven't found that to be the case in Holland.

**SB:** Well, I know they try to like steal your hat and stuff, but they've kind of all got this – they're a very friendly crowd in Holland, whereas Italians ... Italians could turn into a screaming mob and eat your face.

**SM:** Is hat-stealing common?

**FA:** No, I don't remember that.

**SB:** Remember that time we were at the Paradiso, and you went out – you were like, "Let's go get a drink," and you got mobbed?

**FA:** Oh yeah! That was general clothing, though. (Sophia laughs.)

... It's weird. It's also just seeing what songs certain places attach to, as well, is really different. It's different all over the world...

**SB:** ... It's funny, I was going to talk about French crowds. 'Cause, like, French audiences are hilarious, because they honestly stand there, like staring at you with their arms folded, and then you get offstage and they tell you they love you. You know? It's very, like, reserved. Yeah, Europe ... in Europe they feed you.

**FA:** America's great with that kind of stuff. It's just England that's awful. (Chuckles)...

**SB:** But like in France and stuff, they feed you like crazy, and lay on everything.



**FA:** England's just awful because you feel like, no matter how big a show you're playing, or how small a show, it's all kind of the same. Everyone kind of treats you like they're doing you a favor, you know? ... Tonight, there's a similar vibe, actually, where there's like a restaurant, and you have to sound check while people are eating. (Laughs) And it's a thing of, like, well, is it a venue or is it a restaurant? (Laughs) ... There's always that kind of vibe, like—

**SB:** (Smiling) You're the entertainment.  
**FA:** Right, you're the entertainment. (Chuckles)...

**SM:** *You each have a very distinct way with words – in Sophia's album production blog and in Finn's songs. What are your literary backgrounds? How much do your sensibilities rub off on each other?*

**SB:** I think we make kind of a good pair, because I'm kind of incapable of being very serious. Especially written down – I have a really hard time saying anything about – [to Andrews] whereas, you're really good at, like, that side of things. (Laughs) Like being a little more *weighty* with your written language. But yeah, I was studying English lit before this, so I've always done writing and stuff like that.

**SM:** *In the band's description of the songs on the new album, one just seemed like an especially vivid summary: "Music to make love and possibly even build a fort to."*

**SB:** (Smiling) I like that as well.

**FA:** You should hear the song. It sums it up, I think.

**SM:** *Will you play it tonight?*

**FA:** We might. We played it last night and fucked it up. (They laugh.)

**SM:** *In a really, really old interview, Finn, you were quoted as saying – on the topic of organization and recording – "Democracy is for chumps. Long live the belligerent dictator."*

**FA:** (Laughs) I remember that.

**SM:** *Which one if you is the most belligerently dictatorial?*

**FA:** It's changed a lot. I believe that interview was done when I was about 18. (Laughs) And in a kind of very different – it wasn't really a band at all. It drove me nuts. And the last few years, has been all about trying to find that, really, and once I had found it, trying to – you can't really

force those things. You all have to grow together with it. It's a lifetime's work, really.

**SB:** I think I'm belligerent and you're dictatorial.

**FA:** Yeah? (Laughs) We all have our own, yeah, little areas of—

**SB:** Belligerence? (Laughs)

**FA:** Belligerence. (Laughs)

**SM:** *Out of the maybe 20 minutes I've been around you guys so far, no one seems particularly high-strung.*

**SB:** No. We do, as a band, we're – well, not Henning, but me, Dan, and Finn, we're more the short, violent strop kind of people. (Laughs) We're all capable of a good strop now and again.

**SM:** *"Strop"?*

**SB:** Oh, like a tantrum. Like a sulky tantrum. Like when you just get up and leave a room and slam the door. (Laughs)

**FA:** Dan developed a hatred for laminated menus. Which I thought was a joke for the first week or so. But it actually got to the point that we'd go in for lunch somewhere – sort of, in a van, it's always like service station diners that we'd be eating in – and we just walk in, she'd put the menu down in front of him, and he'd just

stand up, walk out. (They laugh hard.) He'd wait outside until we finished. He couldn't stand it! You start to develop, like four months of driving around and going a little insane, just something would, like, symbolize all the evil in the world. (Grits teeth) *Fucking laminated menus! I'm out of here!* ... Yeah, it was great. (Laughs)

**SM:** *Is he over it now?*

**FA:** Still, you'll see it – he won't walk out anymore, but you'll see the recognition.

**SB:** Yeah, *especially* – especially if there are pancakes on the menu.

**FA:** I like laminated menus!

**SB:** Me, too!

**FA:** You can spill stuff on them.

**SB:** Yeah! They feel sturdy.

**FA:** I've got no problem. I just love that, though. It's such a good thing to have a [fit] about. ... But seriously, he's not like that with anything else. He'll never strop about.

**SM:** *Finn, what was your early music career like? I can't imagine your voice working in, say, a school choir.*

**FA:** Ha ha, no.

**SB:** Actually, yeah! It's lucky you didn't try that.

**FA:** (Chuckles) No. That lasted about five minutes. I couldn't sing for a long time. I had a particularly arduous few years that I can't relate to at all now, where I kind of made my mind up when I was about 13 when I had been playing guitar for six months or so and I was getting kind of OK at it, just like, I wanted to be able sing. Because I was writing these songs and I couldn't sing them at all – I couldn't hold a tune. Just this completely tuneless, nasal, horrible voice. (Laughs) And, uh, yeah – I just kept doing it. I've never done anything like that. Never been bad at anything for so long without giving it up. (Laughs)

... It was just people like Tom Waits and Van Morrison and stuff became very important. Well, like – Dylan, actually, was a big one – 'cause before that, I'd only heard singers that could really sing. And I knew my voice would never be like that, that kind of crystal, effortless – like Elton John, Buckley. Just these graceful voices. My voice was always such a fucking *struggle*. Like I had to – I still have to – I have to sing so loud to hit the notes that, when we're recording, I'm not allowed to use the good microphones because I'm too loud. (Laughs) It's a *weird* instrument, I think. I'm convinced – it has complete control over me. I don't know when it's going to stop, or like – I'm totally at the mercy of it. I'm really strict with it, and I don't warm it up, and I don't – I just don't give it any more control over me. Just keep it locked in the room until it learns its lesson. (Chuckles)

**SM:** *It's interesting that you talk about your voice as this kind of beast that you have no control over, because it's such a strength of The Veils' sound.*

**FA:** (Chuckles) That makes it sound a lot sexier than the experience of it is. (Whispers) *"Untamed."* (Laughs)

It's just this fucking – the constant bane – and my whole life is built around this thing that I am still very nervous with. Like, whenever I'm complimented on [my voice], I don't really know

how to take it. ... The kind of compliment that I get the most is that it sounds so, kind of, "naked." And that's how it's always felt like that to me – just incredibly hard to, um, I don't know. I always feel kind of stripped doing it. Because it feels as ugly – or as nice – as I am. (Chuckles) So some days it feels nice, and some days it feels horrible. You know. Funny thing. I think I'll probably spend the rest of my life trying to work out what my relationship with it is. It's very tumultuous.



# THE HUMBLE POWER OF GLASVEGAS

words by Andy Pareti  
photo by Aubrey Edwards

James Allan is not a rock star. As lead singer and songwriter for Scotland's newest rising musical beacon, Glasvegas, Allan has not let the ascension of his band's debut album to No. 2 on the UK charts (scratching at Metallica's trembling ankles) erode his seemingly impenetrable guilelessness. He speaks about the band's sudden fame with the casual fluidity of a veteran, throwing around lots of "yea, man"s and "ya know"s like it's all just some water cooler banter on another day at the office.

Allan's voice, which on the record is an acute mix of Bono, Joe Strummer, Billie Joe Armstrong and Mel Gibson playing William Wallace, sounds a bit debilitated over the techni-crackle of my cell phone.

"My throat's a bit fucked," he explains.

It's been a long week for Glasvegas, which also consists of Allan's cousin Rab Allan on lead guitar, Paul Donoghue on bass, and Caroline McKay on drums. The band just had to cancel their first show of the U.S. tour in Boston because Allan's visa was late showing up and he couldn't get across the border. The band doesn't seem to be suffering the usual rookie rock-lag of world touring, though. They don't seem to be overtly graceful about it, either. They are simply rhythmic, taking it all in stride.

It's the formula that has made Glasvegas' self-titled debut album, released in early September, an intimidating hit in Europe. In a world of decentralized networks, Glasvegas has a beating heart that drives their distorted tales of fractured families and bar brawls. The simplicity, Allan has realized, can be misleading.

"They're just poems," he urges. "I take it as a compliment when everybody thinks that [the songs] are about me ... but they're not autobiographical."

His refusal to take credit adds to the band's charm, which accrues in a sort of working-class-hero way every time Allan describes his songwriting in variations of trying to "make something not shit." It's almost as though Glasvegas don't know they are a rock band. They make

rock music, but that's where the comparisons end. It might turn out to end even before that, as Glasvegas recently has revealed their plans for a follow-up: a Christmas album that will be recorded in Transylvania.

Even regarding this odd detour, Allan is comically matter-of-fact.

"I just wanted to make some songs, you know?" he shrugs.

Don't write off his wide-eyed streamlining as naiveté, though. The band knows full well what they are potentially getting themselves into by using the holiday format for a sophomore effort. The long and short of it seems to be that they really don't care. The beauty of, as Allan puts it, going from living at home and being unemployed to challenging for the top spot on the UK's charts, is that the band doesn't know how to answer to anyone else but themselves. And if you think there might be a deeper symbolism behind the choice of Transylvania as a recording locale, well, the band won't admit to it. It was a place Allan always had wanted to see since growing up in Glasgow, and being in a rock 'n' roll band is his opportunity.

It also seems to be an opportunity to illustrate life on Glasgow's streets. "Geraldine", the second track on Glasvegas, is the one song Allan admits is actually based on a life experience. The song begins as a blackened Cinderella fairy tale, complete with a fairy godmother who will "be at your side to console / When you're standing on the window ledge / I'll take you back from the edge / I will turn your tide". It is revealed later that the "angel on your shoulder" actually is a social worker. Glasvegas' sort of romanticized reality pumps life through the whole album, like on "Go Square Go", which is sort of a "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" as done by The Cure. The song is an orchestral pep rally before a street fight, both a jock jam and a goth ballad.

In fact, "orchestral" is a befitting if not unusual term for a rock band such as Glasvegas. Trying to find Allan's musical muse takes you on some crazy detours. When asked about his favorite new artists this year, he fawns about Elvis Presley. When talking about the Jesus and Mary Chain, he meanders into his love for Tchaikovsky and Mozart. Suddenly, it doesn't seem his throat is bothering him anymore. And through it all, he keeps coming back to classical music,

describing his backdrop to life as orchestral and trying to achieve a particular "fluidity" with the swaths of thick distortion that smear Glasvegas' grounded pop songs into tapestries of rain, grit and sadness.

"There's a lot of things that you can't help. But really, life's so fucking mad, you know, that you can't say what it's gonna be. That's the same for you as it is me, ya know?"

It's not exactly the sound one would expect to become the current obsession of magazines such as NME. But that's what happens with a little serendipity on your side, the way Scottish music mogul Alan McGee happened to catch the band play in a similar fashion to how he first discovered Oasis nearly two decades earlier. McGee's backing of Glasvegas has propelled them ever since, entering them into a major-label bidding war won by Columbia and thus placing them on that ever-precarious pedestal of potential. Glamour is a scary thing to happen to such a practical band, but these are things Allan insists Glasvegas doesn't think about.

"There's a lot of things that you can't help," he admits. "But really, life's so fucking mad, you know, that you can't say what it's gonna be. That's the same for you as it is me, ya know?"

And of course, after a bit of contemplation, he centers back on his ongoing mantra of how he just likes to write songs and be inspired, obliged to chip away at the totem of mystique built around a band all too humble to accept anything larger than life. It's an attitude that has attracted fans everywhere the band goes. Sure, it's gracious and polite, but it's also human. Glasvegas are the working man's band — they clock in, make something gorgeous, and clock out.

"After that, I just don't know. Ya know?"

Yeah. We know.





words by Carly Kocurek  
photo by Aubrey Edwards

## Sick of the Singles Scene NOAH AND THE WHALE

In the era of digital downloads and adspot hit-making, there's been a lot of buzz about the fate of the album. Talk has ranged from passing commentary on the shrinking role of liner notes to seemingly premature pronouncements of death. Charlie Fink, lead singer and founding member of U.K.-based Noah and the Whale, is not quite willing to let the album go quietly into the proverbial good night.

For Fink, who spearheads much of the band's songwriting, the album remains a vital part of his goals as a musician. Even as he enjoys the generally warm reception of the band's debut, *Peaceful, the World Lays Me Down* which hit the states in September of this year, he's thinking big thoughts about how to best ensure that the band's next project gets listened to as he and his band would intend – as an album, not a collection of individual tracks.

"At the moment, the way music is listened to, the album loses its value," Fink said. "It's kind of frustrating when you make a record like that, as a collection of songs, like a novel, and they get separated and treated [individually]."

Perhaps "like a novel" is a dangerous simile – after all, literary theorists have been gabbing about the death of the novel for the better part of a century. For albums to earn attention at this point in time, they have to do something spectacular, and the name most frequently lobbed at album-length works that aspire to cohesion for the past four years has been "concept album."

The concept album as currently defined has some implications of lofty artistic purpose – in a post-*Sgt. Pepper's* world, we've come to expect concept albums to be big, imposing productions that are full of big ideas. Although the concept album has a history that stretches decades before the 1967 Beatles record, that history largely has come to seem irrelevant when thinking about the kinds of projects that have emerged since the 1960s. Concept albums today are supposed to be near-epic in scope. Attempts to reach that kind of status often are as bad as they are ambitious. Take as case in point the too-bizarre-to-forget ... *The Life of Chris Gaines* (1999) which Garth Brooks recorded as a fabricated alt-rock star, and Lou Reed's forgettable, regrettable Edgar Allan Poe-inspired album *The Raven* (2003). This is not to say they're doomed to failure – the Mountain Goats have made several successful concept albums, including *All Hail West Texas* and *Tallahassee* (both 2002).

Point being, in shooting for the album as the desired unit of consumption, Fink is setting the stakes high – when he reveals that the band is planning to release a full-length video in conjunction with their next album, just how high becomes more clear. The band's other members including Fink's older brother Doug (drums), Doug's childhood friend Matt Urby (bass), and former schoolmate Tom Hobden (fiddle) seem up to the challenge. And, regardless of whether Noah and the Whale's albums are concept albums in some purist's sense, they're aiming to accomplish the kind of work that concept albums can.

"Because of the nature of how I write, I write songs topic by topic. I didn't know what we were going to do after the first record," Fink said. "When you finish a record, you've got a blank canvas to decide what to do. Some of the previous stuff was in the style of Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach."

That "previous stuff" includes the aforementioned debut album, and the references to American filmmakers Anderson and Baumbach shouldn't be too surprising. The band's name is a double-reference to Baumbach, com-

bing his first name with the title of one of his films, *The Squid and the Whale* (2005). And the band's first U.K. hit, the toe-tapping "5 Years Time" received a substantial boost in popularity largely because of a music video that echoed Wes Anderson's cartoonish mid-century sensibilities.

*Peaceful, the World Lays Me Down* may do some of what Fink would have hoped – listened to end-to-end, the tracks do have a certain cohesion. Throughout the body presented on the album, there is a feeling of disconnect and a bit of gentle longing. In "Second Lover", Fink sings about the desire for a woman the speaker knows only on the Internet, lamenting that he doesn't know her real name, her real age, or even her shoe size. Even the relatively bouncy "5 Years Time" manages at best a c'est la vie attitude – at the song's conclusion, the singer admits that in five years' time, the darling couple at the song's center may not even be speaking.

Fink says that the next album will be a "heartbreak" album, a thematic center that may bring the subtle sense of longing in *Peaceful, the World Lays Me Down* to the forefront. He's moved from the pastel dysfunction of Wes Anderson to the brooding social satire of Paul Thomas Anderson.

"The new songs would definitely be in the style of *There Will Be Blood*. I went to see that film five times at the cinema. I think it's one of the best films ever made," Fink said. "A reviewer I really like described it as having no cinematic grammar. You're never quite aware of what sort of film you're watching."

Fink says the screenings he attended showed just what that lack of grammar might mean. At some screenings, the audience laughed; at others, they sat in tense silence. The viewing experience was different each time. That a film without cinematic grammar would appeal to someone who confesses that he's been frustrated with writers' attempts to define his band's admittedly small body of work makes sense, particularly as Fink is promising something radically different for their next album. Whether the band will be able to carry an audience across a potentially wild adjustment of tone has yet to be seen. The attempt – like the insistence on albums that need and deserve to be listened to as albums – is ambitious, particularly for a young band. Fink has much of the material for the next album in hand already, and, as someone who seems to have a bit of an affinity for film, he is excited about the film that will be part of the project.

"Although there is a narrative in the album, I don't want that to be a direct narrative in the film," Fink detailed. "It's kind of three characters, but all telling the same stories. It's kind of like *I'm Not There* – the Dylan film – in that it's telling one story through three characters, but it's essentially the same."

The challenge of making an album that will compel audience members to take in the whole rather than three-minute chunks will be a tall order, even with the band is employing fairly sophisticated transmedia production. Whether Fink agrees with the assessment of the band's work as "epic," the demands he places on records certainly seem to justify that description.

On one hand, the cards seem stacked against the album – not just the album as produced by Noah and the Whale, but the album, period. Its continuance as a useful form of culture-making is questionable; we may be just waiting for the official announcement from some continental theorist. On the other hand, the challenges of doing so may be just that: challenges, and not bars. The issue of whether the album should still matter – like the question of actual cultural significance of the novel – may never be clearly resolved. Watching just how successful bands such as Noah and the Whale manage to be at selling albums as albums, rather than songs, may provide some insight. At best, Noah and the Whale may prove all those mourning the album dead wrong. At worst, they could turn out to be like a digital-age Icarus, destroyed for flying too close not to the sun, but, perhaps, to the screen.

The year ended much like 2008 began – with the music industry’s focus locked upon Radiohead’s *In Rainbows*. Whereas 2007 wrapped up with the groundbreaking pay-what-you-want digital release, January began with the physical version of the Oxford, England, quintet’s LP hitting stores and the calendar ended with the release of first-year sales figures.

It was a year that saw The Grammy Awards turn 50, Dave Grohl deservingly headline Wembley Stadium almost a decade and a half after the last Nirvana gig, Paul McCartney return to Israel for the first time since The Beatles were banned from there, and Gun N’ Roses finally give their first original LP in 15 years an official release date.

Rage Against the Machine took the comeback stage, as well as Ben Folds Five and My Bloody Valentine. Be Your Own Pet, Dirty Pretty Things, The Helicopters, Moros Eros and The Dead 60s were among the acts that called it quits. Both The Smiths and The Jackson 5 had members release contradictory reports about reunion tours, while Bo Diddley, Isaac Hayes, Jerry Finn, Richard Wright and Levi Stubbs were among those performers who died since the start of the year.

America elected a president with Wilco on his iPod and Kanye West in his cell phone, while everyone from Conor Oberst to Bruce Springsteen to Bloc Party turned out to stump for the candidate of their choice.

MySpace transitioned from a Web site for bands to post their music to a medium to sell it, and festivals such as SXSW, Lollapalooza, Glastonbury, Coachella and Pitchfork Music were bigger than ever.

But without the music, none of this would have happened, and 2008 had it in droves. From new bands that sparked our interest, to old reliable ones that didn’t disappoint, the past 12 months has been a non-stop auditory overload. Among the tens of thousands of albums, and hundreds of thousands of songs, there are some that have been stuck in heads of Soundcheck Magazine staff members and editors just a bit more than the rest.

**STAFF PICKS**

<b>Michael Marshall - Publisher</b>		<b>Newcomer</b>	<b>Most Anticipated Leak</b>
<b>Album</b>	<b>Song</b>	1) Fleet Foxes	1) Menomena
1) Fleet Foxes - <i>Fleet Foxes</i>	1) MGMT - “Kids”	2) MGMT	2) The Postal Service
2) TV on the Radio - <i>Dear Science</i>	2) Fleet Foxes - “White Winter Hymnal”	3) Vampire Weekend	3) Guster
3) My Morning Jacket - <i>Evil Urges</i>	3) My Morning Jacket - “I’m Amazed”	4) Fanfarlo	4) Doves
4) Ra Ra Riot - <i>The Rhumb Line</i>	4) Yeasayer - “2080”	5) The Cool Kids	5) M. Ward
5) Vampire Weekend - <i>Vampire Weekend</i>	5) Islands - “The Arm”		
6) MGMT - <i>Oracular Spectacular</i>	6) Ra Ra Riot - “Dying Is Fine”	<b>Concert</b>	
7) Islands - <i>Arm’s Way</i>	7) Vampire Weekend - “M79”	1) My Morning Jacket @ Stubb’s	
8) Okkervil River - <i>The Stand Ins</i>	8) TV on the Radio - “Dancing Choose”	2) Soundcheck Magazine’s 2nd Birthday Party	
9) Cloud Cult - <i>Feel Good Ghosts</i>	9) Cut Copy - “So Haunted”	3) Fleet Foxes @ ACL Fest	
10) Cut Copy - <i>In Ghost Colours</i>	10) Cloud Cult - “No One Said It Would Be Easy”	3b) Justice w/ DJ Mehdi @ Stubb’s	
		4) Bloc Party w/ CSS @ House of Blues Chicago	
		5) Gogol Bordello @ Lollapalooza	

<b>Tricia Marshall - Managing Editor</b>		<b>Newcomer</b>	<b>Most Anticipated Leak</b>
<b>Album</b>	<b>Song</b>	1) MGMT	1) Doves
1) TV on the Radio - <i>Dear Science</i>	1) MGMT - “Kids”	2) Vampire Weekend	2) Menomena
2) Vampire Weekend - <i>Vampire Weekend</i>	2) Black Kids - “I’m Not Gonna Teach Your Boy friend How to Dance With You”	3) Fanfarlo	3) Stars
3) Cloud Cult - <i>Feel Good Ghosts</i>	3) Islands - “Pieces of You”	4) The Dodos	4) Stellastarr*
4) Ra Ra Riot - <i>The Rhumb Line</i>	4) Ra Ra Riot - “Ghost Under Rocks”	5) Glasvegas	5) Andrew Bird
5) MGMT - <i>Oracular Spectacular</i>	5) Cloud Cult - “No One Said It Would Be Easy”		
6) Frightened Rabbit - <i>The Midnight Organ Fight</i>	6) Does It Offend You Yeah - “Dawn of the Dead”	<b>Concert</b>	
7) Kristoffer Rangstam- <i>Wrong Side of the Room</i>	7) TV on the Radio - “Dancing Choose”	1) MGMT/Yeasayer @ Emo’s	
8) The Notwist- <i>The Devil, You + Me</i>	8) Vampire Weekend - “M79”	2) Bloc Party w/ CSS @ House of Blues Chicago	
9) Deerhunter- <i>Microcastle</i>	9) Fanfarlo - “We Live By the Lake	3) Soundcheck Magazine’s 2nd Birthday Party	
10) Glasvegas - <i>Glasvegas</i>	10) Coldplay - “Viva La Vida”	4) Gogol Bordello @ Lollapalooza	
		5) Cloud Cult SXSW Showcase @ Red Eyed Fly	

<b>Randy Cremean - Director of Photography &amp; Design</b>		<b>Newcomer</b>	<b>Most Anticipated Leak</b>
<b>Album</b>	<b>Song</b>	1) Fleet Foxes	1) Menomena
1) Fleet Foxes - <i>Fleet Foxes</i>	1) Sigur Ros - “Inni Mer Syngur Vitleysingur”	2) Vampire Weekend	2) Midlake
2) Why? - <i>Alopecia</i>	2) Fleet Foxes - “White Winter Hymnal”	3) Glasvegas	3) Animal Collective
3) TV on the Radio - <i>Dear Science</i>	3) MGMT - “Kids”	4) Fanfarlo	4) M. Ward
4) Frightened Rabbit - <i>The Midnight Organ Fight</i>	4) Frightened Rabbit - “Keep Yourself Warm”	5) The Cool Kids	5) The Postal Service
5) Man Man - <i>Rabbit Habits</i>	5) Vampire Weekend - “M79”		
6) Vampire Weekend - <i>Vampire Weekend</i>	6) Why? - “The Vowels Pt 2”	<b>Concert</b>	
7) Wolf Parade - <i>At Mt. Zoomer</i>	7) Glasvegas - “Daddy’s Gone”	1) My Morning Jacket @ Stubb’s	
8) Glasvegas - <i>Glasvegas</i>	8) Black Mountain - “Tyrants”	2) Soundcheck Magazine’s 2nd Birthday Party	
9) Hercules and Love Affair - <i>S/T</i>	9) Pete and the Pirates - “Mr. Understanding”	3) Fleet Foxes @ Mohawk	
10) Cloud Cult - <i>Feel Good Ghosts</i>	10) Ra Ra Riot - “Ghost Under Rocks”	4a) Girl Talk @ Lollapalooza	
		4b) Saul Williams @ Lollapalooza	
		5) Man Man @ Emo’s	

<b>Elliot Cole - Associate Editor &amp; News Editor</b>		<b>Newcomer</b>	<b>Most Anticipated Leak</b>
<b>Album</b>	<b>Song</b>	1) Fleet Foxes	1) The Wrens
1) Fleet Foxes - <i>Fleet Foxes</i>	1) MGMT - “Kids”	2) The Cool Kids	2) The Postal Service
2) My Morning Jacket - <i>Evil Urges</i>	2) Fleet Foxes - “White Winter Hymnal”	3) MGMT	3) M. Ward
3) The Dodos - <i>Visiter</i>	3) My Morning Jacket - “Thank You Too!”	4) Vampire Weekend	4) D’Angelo
4) MGMT - <i>Oracular Spectacular</i>	4) Why? - “The Vowels Pt 2”	5) Guns N’ Roses	5) Glassjaw
5) Vampire Weekend - <i>Vampire Weekend</i>	5) Ra Ra Riot - “Ghost Under Rocks”		
6) Kings of Leon - <i>Only By the Night</i>	6) Frightened Rabbit - “The Modern Leper”	<b>Concert</b>	
7) The Cool Kids - <i>The Bake Sale</i>	7) The Dodos - “Fools”	1) My Morning Jacket @ Stubb’s	
8) Wolf Parade - <i>At Mt. Zoomer</i>	8) Jenny Lewis - ‘Acid Tongue”	2) Soundcheck Magazine’s 2nd Birthday Party	
9) Cloud Cult - <i>Feel Good Ghosts</i>	9) Santogold - “Creator”	3) Conor Oberst w/Jenny Lewis, M. Ward @ ACL Aftershow, La Zona Rosa	
10) Why? - <i>Alopecia</i>	10) Kings of Leon - “Use Somebody”	4) Fleet Foxes @ Mohawk	
		5) Kanye West @ Lollapalooza	

<b>Ryan Ffrench - Staff Writer</b>		<b>Newcomer</b>
<b>Album</b>	<b>Song</b>	1) Bodies of Water
1) Cut Copy - <i>In Ghost Colors</i>	1) Hercules and Love Affair - “Blind”	2) The Dodos
2) No Age - <i>Nouns</i>	2) Fleet Foxes - “Mykonos”	3) Fleet Foxes
3) Destroyer - <i>Trouble in Dreams</i>	3) Cut Copy - “Far Away”	4) Air France
4) Bodies of Water - <i>A Certain Feeling</i>	4) Wolf Parade - “California Dreamer”	5) The Bug
5) Crystal Castles - <i>Crystal Castles</i>	5) Crystal Castles - “Untrust Us”	<b>Concert</b>
6) Fleet Foxes - <i>Fleet Foxes</i>	6) TV on the Radio - “Halfway Home”	1) Cut Copy @ Pitchfork Music Festival
7) Hercules and Love Affair - <i>S/T</i>	7) Animal Collective - “Street Flash”	2) No Age @ Pitchfork Music Festival
8) Portishead - <i>Third</i>	8) Air France - “June Evenings”	3) Bodies of Water @ Schuba’s
9) Man Man - <i>Rabbit Habits</i>	9) Why? - “The Vowels Pt 2”	4) Radiohead @ Lollapalooza
10) The Dodos - <i>Visiter</i>	10) Midnight Juggernauts - “Into the Galaxy”	5) Simian Mobile Disco @ SXSW

<b>Derek Wright - Staff Writer</b>		<b>Concert</b>
<b>Album</b>	<b>Song</b>	1) Girl Talk @ Lollapalooza
1) Kid, You’ll Move Mountains - <i>Loomings</i>	1) Jamie Lidell - “All I Wanna Do”	2) Radiohead @ Lollapalooza
2) Girl Talk - <i>Feed the Animals</i>	2) The Ting Tings - “That’s Not My Name”	3) Spoon @ Pitchfork Music Festival
3) Phantom Planet - <i>Phantom Planet</i>	3) Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds - “More News From Nowhere”	4) Public Enemy @ Pitchfork Music Festival
4) The Ting Tings - <i>We Started Nothing</i>	4) MGMT - “Time To Pretend”	5) Perry Ferrell w/ Slash @ Lollapalooza
5) Wolf Parade - <i>At Mt. Zoomer</i>	5) Caesars - “No Tomorrow”	
6) TV on the Radio - <i>Dear Science</i>	6) Mates of State - “Now”	
7) Tilly and the Wall - <i>O</i>	7) Tilly and the Wall - “Dust Me Off”	
8) We Are Scientists - Brain Thrust Mastery	8) Phantom Planet - “Raise the Dead”	
9) The Last Shadow Puppets - <i>The Age of the Understatement</i>	9) The Raconteurs - “Hold Up”	
10) Spiritualized - <i>Songs in A&amp;E</i>	10) TV on the Radio - “Family Tree”	

## Fleet Foxes - *Fleet Foxes*

Released 06.03.2008 on Sub Pop

words by Ryan E. Johnson



### Runners-Up

2. TV on the Radio - *Dear Science*,
3. Vampire Weekend - *Vampire Weekend*
4. Frightened Rabbit - *The Midnight Organ Fight*
5. MGMT - *Oracular Spectacular*

There is a certain feeling of awe that comes over a person the first time he listens to Fleet Foxes, much akin to his first time viewing a Matisse, or his first bite of Tiramisu. Fleet Foxes seems to propel itself beyond the medium and become something otherworldly. As the Foxes' ethereal choruses travel through headphones and past his eardrums, the listener finds himself transported to heavenly cities and fantastic woodlands.

Part of the magic of Fleet Foxes is in its simplicity. With limited instrumentation and tranquil, folk-influenced melodies, each song allows Robin Pecknold's gorgeous voice to shine through. The vocal harmonies that also flourish across this album evoke the best of bands like Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and Simon and Garfunkel, creating a notably unique sound compared to other artists today. The album takes the best from yesterday and today and creates something timeless.

Fleet Foxes opens with some playful balladeering, but once the full brunt of "Sun It Rises" hits you, you'll be waiting with baited breath for what comes next. The album flows from the happy, upbeat sounds of "Ragged Wood" to the somber, heartbreaking notes of "Tiger Mountain Peasant Song", from the fantasy realms of "Your Protector" to the simple, natural glow of "Meadowlarks". All the while, it takes us along through a mélange of peace and tranquility, before finally dropping us off at our destination, "Oliver James." "Oliver James", the album's closer, is a shining star amongst shining stars. Its use of acoustic guitar, its simple, folky melody, and Pecknold's a cappella singing make for one of the best experiences you're likely to have with a song this year.

While listening to Fleet Foxes, one may just realize that he's listening to the most beautiful album of the year. Calling Fleet Foxes one of the most beautiful albums of the year, however, wouldn't be giving it enough credit. It may very well be one of the most beautiful albums of the decade.

## "Kids" - MGMT

on the album, *Oracular Spectacular*

words by Elliot Cole



### Runners-Up

2. Fleet Foxes - "White Winter Hymnal"
3. Ra Ra Riot - "Ghost Under Rocks"
4. Why - "The Vowels, Pt. 2"
5. Vampire Weekend - "M79"

The jubilant squeals of childhood laughter drape the synths and keys of MGMT's "Kids", our choice for "Song of the Year". It's a song that captures both the whimsicality of youth and the drama of growing up, and in doing so it also summarizes the theme of 2008: upstart bands coming from out of nowhere to land magazine covers, charting albums, and huge festival crowds. The year featured everyone from The Cool Kids to Vampire Weekend blowing up on the scene, but it was MGMT that seemed to spike twice in one year, in no small part thanks to "Kids", a song that exploded on Internet forums and became one of the most remixed tracks of the year.

From mashups to remixes to covers, MGMT was successfully paired with the likes of LCD Soundsystem, Souldwax, The Clash, and Ratatat, making for a track that became a dance floor staple. The Kooks (another buzz band of 2008) redid "Kids" as a somber acoustic track, while an alternate EP version of the songs also slipped onto the web. "Kids" is both heartwarming and nostalgic, but at the same time it carries a bittersweet longing for past innocence. "No time to think of consequences," sings MGMT frontman Andrew VanWyngarden, which may as well be the musical mantra of 2008: live fast and grab the reins of stardom, because there is no time to waste.

## My Morning Jacket

Stubb's, Austin, TX 08.24.2008

words by Elliot Cole photos by Randy Cremean



Through My Morning Jacket's decade-long career, fans have rolled with the group's transition from southern-tinged lo-fi startups to the psychedelic-tinted, valiant rock stalwarts they have become. As Jim James and company took stage on a humid Sunday night (James would later suffer from dehydration), it had an aura of familiarity. After all, James had one of the most buzzed-about sets of SXSW, and his band both performed on KLRU's Austin City Limits and played at the festival of the same name in the past few years. Austin and My Morning Jacket are, to be cliché, the proverbial match made in heaven: a loose, eclectic band for a city with the same qualities.

With that element of familiarity, fans undeniably knew what to expect from the Stubb's performance: an extensive, diverse set list that would reach from grooving to transcendent to straight-up head banging. MMJ didn't disappoint, with a 28-song set that spanned the breadth of the group's career while providing an intimacy generally unseen in the large, deafening confines of Stubb's. But that's what the group does best: transformation, be it in their sound, show, or their unwavering ability to make even the biggest of crowds feel like a small room.

The group opened with "Anytime" before seamlessly segueing into crowd favorite "Off the Record". Yellow lights radiated through the silhouette of James' curly locks during "I'm Amazed", while the lights appropriately alternated between red and green on "Sec Walkin". The crowd further expressed the overarching sense of intimacy with warm receptions to songs both new and old. While *Evil Urges* could be seen as the group's most divisive record (perhaps even more so than 2005's *Z*), fans sang and grooved to "Thank You, Too", "Evil Urges", and the idiosyncratic falsetto wail of "Highly Suspicious".

With this given intimacy in tow, the band's "best songs" become a sort of variable. Many fans undoubtedly opened their hearts to "Phone Went West" or "Worldless Chorus", while the enthralling, immaculate guitar riffage of tracks like "Lay Low" most affected others. (And, for the record, this was not a show of casual concert-goers: bohemians, yuppies, hipsters and stoners were all awkwardly-but-happily interspersed amongst the crowd.) "Dondante", however, was unarguably one of the songs of the night, featuring James seated with a towel over his head and backdropped by a smooth blue light. This image was haunting, possessing, and beautiful before it erupted into white light and crescendos that melted over the audience,

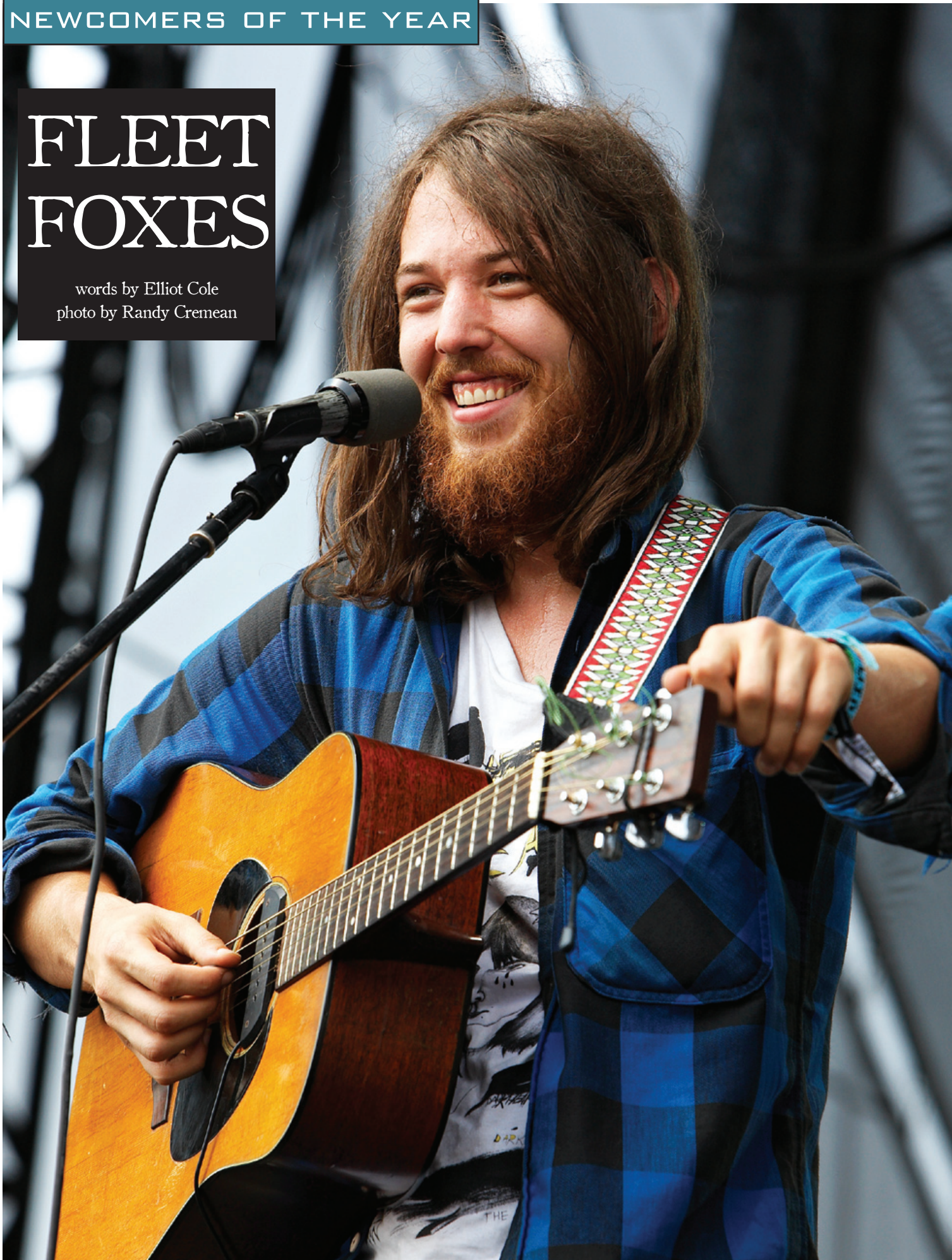
At the end of the night – and with such a wide-ranging set – the performance will be a subjective memory. It was ripping, heavy, and experimental to some, but harmonious, entrancing, and inspirational to others. Again, one of MMJ's best qualities comes to the forefront: there is something there for everybody, and the band brings people's tastes to a sort of meeting point, even for the most stubborn of genre-clingers. The fans of experimental guitar work were swayed by the omnichord of "Touch Me I'm Going to Scream Pt. 2", while even the most allegiant lo-fi fans had to love the showmanship of "Highly Suspicious".

MMJ's reputation precedes the grizzly members of the band, but in no way does it engulf the group. The band establishes a sense of epic climax throughout their performance, developing an underlying sentiment of "How the hell could they possibly follow that?!" And therein may be the biggest of MMJ's strengths: despite everything you know about them, one of the greatest American rock 'n' roll bands will find a way to surprise you.



# FLEET FOXES

words by Elliot Cole  
photo by Randy Cremean



There is a singularity that exists inherently in musicianship. A song is, after all, just the sum of its parts; it is a culmination of the intertwined notes and melodies of each instrument. Every now and then, those parts work so well together – in such startling precision – that they are almost transparent. The individual nature of each instrument gives way, and all that exists is the music. Seattle’s Fleet Foxes have done just this, crafting a sound that manifests itself into a sort of communal entity, which hovers softly in the air above the group. The collective spirit of Fleet Foxes proves to be just that: collective, spirited, and the root of a sound that is bringing a new definition to the term “harmony.”

On a warm, sweat-inducing Austin night, the entirety of Fleet Foxes is riddled with the flu. Robin Pecknold – the 22-year-old frontman of Fleet Foxes, if there is such a thing – is undeterred, sweeping his way through the band’s lush pastoral songs with a determined, if not bashful, fervor.

“I can’t believe this many people know about us ...” he mumbles, before adding, “in the world!” While his modesty is endearing, it’s also completely unfounded: Fleet Foxes has sold out every night of the southwest leg of their tour, capitalizing on the acclaim that has made their self-titled debut LP one of the best-reviewed albums of the year.

On that album, the quintet – also featuring guitarist Skye Skjelset, keyboardist Casey Wescott, bassist Christian Wargo, and newly added drummer Josh Tillman – reaches an unparalleled sort of hymnlike synchronicity. Their voices (and, for that matter, instruments) brush over one another, molding themselves into one collective, seamless, sonic masterpiece. Each wave of noise is indecipherable on its own, but the ocean that is Fleet Foxes is utterly beautiful. The band describes their sound as “baroque harmonic pop jams,” and they aren’t far off. From the opening a cappella of “White Winter Hymnal” – appropriately named both for its churchlike harmonies and chilling vocal peaks – it’s evident that Fleet Foxes’ songs are intricately nuanced and ornate, yet openly accessible. It’s the vibrancy of Band of Horses meshing with the southern folk charm of My Morning Jacket, all wrapped in the veneer of the 1960s.

Pecknold unofficially started the band with

Skjelset in high school; the pair dabbled more in the sound of their parents’ records than that of modern Seattle icons. Instead of, say, Modest Mouse or Sunny Day Real Estate, Pecknold and Skjelset tried to emulate the sounds of The Beach Boys or Crosby, Stills & Nash.

“We have an appreciation for lots of different time periods,” says the humble Wargo, explaining his perspective on the band’s penchant for ’60s-influenced songs. “I don’t know if it’s really the time period itself or the music ... I don’t think I’d necessarily divide things up in my mind according to decade. I think there are just certain themes and spirits in music that resonate with me.”

*“I can’t believe this many people know about us... in the world!”*

- Robin Pecknold

Those themes and spirits are alive and well with the band, maintaining a sense of traditional folksy roots with a modern indie sensibility. Pecknold and Skjelset recruited the articulate Wescott (previously of Seldom) and the disarming Wargo (of Crystal Skulls) after Fleet Foxes was formally created in 2006, and the result was *Sun Giant*, an EP displaying the group’s prowess. Wargo recalls his joining the band: “I was sort of brought in to help bring some of [the vocal harmonies] to the live thing. At the time, there were only three singers, but most of the songs had to have at least four-part harmonies ... It seemed to gel pretty quickly because I was used to doing those kind of high parts. That was kind of the missing link. I feel like I integrated pretty quickly, and it was obvious what was possible going into [the *Sun Giant* EP].”

Finding that perfect vocal harmony proves to be the element that makes Fleet Foxes tick, but there is an obvious harmony in their personal dynamic as well. The bandmates are all connected in various facets, be it growing up together or being involved in the same Seattle acts. Wargo and Westcott, who previously had worked together on Crystal Skulls, share a unique perspective of the group, since they both joined slightly after Fleet Foxes’ original recordings. That harmony even makes its way into the business side of things: Pecknold’s sister Aja helped set up our interview, while his brother Sean was behind the

camera for their first music video.

That connectivity also makes songwriting an easy process. The bandmates emphasize that their music is spurred more by a feeling than brainstorming sit-downs. Their sound is unwaveringly natural, a testament to a band that writes music based on emotional connections above technical structure.

“I don’t know music theory, so to me, it’s all just sounds and feelings,” Wargo says. Wescott echoes the sentiment: “It’s gonna be, at the end of the day, intuitive choices,” he says. “Cause there isn’t any theory of music ... there [are] no rules. And if there are, the music is probably whack. At the end of the day, it’s what resonates a feeling of [pause] completion, I guess.”

When asked what gives that completion to a song, Wescott is somewhat vague.

“It’s kinda like just trying to find a feeling,” he claims.

Wargo offers, “It’s a puzzle; it comes together slowly.” He also acknowledges that, “[The songs] are definitely challenging songs to reproduce live ... I think we have kind of grown a lot to adjust to the subtleties that are required to do what we do now.” Despite these challenges, Fleet Foxes have managed to make their sound seem almost easy, a wistful experience that flows over its audience.

During their set that night, Pecknold sits atop a stool with an unruly beard and scraggly, mountain-man clothes. He has mastered the art of intimate banter with the front rows of the crowd, playfully announcing that, “I think I have flabby arms”, among other modesties. As Fleet Foxes churns through their set, Pecknold, Wescott, Wargo, and company are swept away. They are wrapped up into a communal atmosphere, that sense of harmony that becomes a near-palpable force. The crowd is absorbed into it, reverent of the transcendental, churchlike experience evoked by the sound emanating from the speakers. Fleet Foxes has taken the audience’s breath away, and, in doing so, reintroduced them to everything music should be about. It’s unexplainable, but, as the fans will testify, the ability to tap into the choir of Fleet Foxes is harmony enough for the rest of us.

## Runners-Up

2. Vampire Weekend
3. MGMT
4. Fanfarlo
5. (Tie) The Dodos and The Cool Kids



photo by Alicia J. Rose

## All the music that influenced me most in life is music I can no longer listen to: Twelve Favorite Albums by Twelve Favorite Bands (1988-2002)

By Danny Seim

### 7. Poor Old Lu, *Sin*

There were two institutions in mid-'90s Portland that kept me semi-enthusiastic about not losing my religion. The first was called Skate Church, and it was, uh, a skate church. Every Tuesday night, a carload of Mountain Dew-fueled teenage friends and I would arrive to shred our, er, "butts" off in the recreation room of Greater Portland Bible Church, which was converted into an Pentecostal plywood playground by a group of sanctified skaters. The only hitch was that you had to stay for a 30-minute sermon between shred sessions. No problem there. We were all used to spending every Sunday morning

sitting on hard pews listening to far more stale messages with nary a vert ramp in sight.

The second place was called The Push, and its moniker was less descriptive. The Push was an all-ages Christian rock club (let me know if there's such thing as a 21+ Christian rock club) in the basement of a church in Southeast Portland. I was there at least once a weekend; it didn't matter who was playing. I figured other Christian artists besides Stryper, Amy Grant, and U2 (fittingly, The Push was named after a line in "Zoo Station", where Bono stated the fact that he, too, was ready for the little venue) had to exist out there somewhere, but I had little motivation to seek them out. I figured I had already achieved immoral musical perfection with my Alice In Chains and Spin Doctors CDs. When I first started hitting the godly alt-rock scene in late 1994, all of the bands were foreign to me.

The Push was known to drip sweat off the ceilings when the club was at capacity; this was a frequent occurrence because of the number of Tooth & Nail bands traveling up to Seattle and

back. Ah, Tooth & Nail. All I wanted in life from 1994-96 was for my band to be on that heavenly record label's roster. They had a Christian doppelganger for every prominent secular band at the time, and the Christian Supply book/record store I frequented proudly displayed this fact on a "Recommended If You Like" cheat sheet next to their CD aisle (yes; "aisle," singular). It looked kind of like this:

MXPX – R.I.Y.L. NOFX, Green Day, Rancid  
Starflyer 59 – R.I.Y.L. My Bloody Valentine,  
The Smiths, Hum  
Danielson Familie – R.I.Y.L. Beck, Ween,  
Daniel Johnston  
Poor Old Lu – R.I.Y.L. Smashing Pumpkins,  
Red Hot Chili Peppers  
Bede – R.I.Y.L. Live, Pearl Jam, The Beatles

I ate this handy little photocopied comparison guide up. Not only was I saving my own soul from raging hellfire, I also was consolidating and streamlining my own CD collection as a result. I could get the same testosterone-laden, growled-vocal fix from one record by the Tooth & Nail band Sometime Sunday as I could from an entire catalogue of Stone Temple Pilots, Soundgarden, or Pearl Jams, without all the excessive demonic baggage. Best of all, there was a pawn shop right down the street from the Christian Supply. Heck, I could unload all of my pre-righteous Columbia House purchases at the former and stock up at the latter!

And I should probably also confess that I never really saw that last one on the list, outside of my own sick fantasies. Bede was my first band. Our name was taken from a first-century monk called The Venerable Bede and was chosen by our bassist, Justin Harris, with whom I still happen to be bandmates. It was pronounced "bead," contrary to most people's insistence to call us "bidet" (and now, with Menomena, we get the occasional "man-enema" pronunciation – a cruel cosmic consistency if I ever heard one). I remain entirely embarrassed of that era.

I was the singer and lyricist, which is a huge deal in a Christian band. A good phrase or chorus doesn't just give your fans (of which we had approximately 14 at our peak, mostly blood relatives or reluctant girlfriends) something catchy to hum to themselves: it also just might save them from eternal damnation. And try to save them, I did. An early masterpiece was a little number I liked to call "Blue Light Temple". It was a rocking little ditty that oh-so-subtly compared a sinner's body ("the body" being the temple of Christ, duh) to the sale section at K-Mart.

The only thing about it (as with most of our other songs) that wasn't directly stolen from Pearl Jam were the words, which would have been a vast improvement had I decided to lift those from Eddie as well. Rough stuff.

So I'd go to The Push every weekend, see band after band, and take mental notes. I was immediately drawn to a quartet from Seattle called Poor Old Lu. I think the name was a reference to the Chronicles of Narnia, which was A-OK with me. C.S. Lewis was a total Christian, you know? And this was a decade before the decidedly average movie (and subsequent SNL hip-hop classic). The band was amazing. Scott, the singer, was absolutely spellbinding to watch onstage. He didn't just rock out mindlessly up there. He actually had moves! I wanted to have moves! Alas, the only thing I was moving were my bowels, approximately 37 times in that torturous hour before each performance.

The rest of the band was riveting up there, too. Aaron and Jesse were siblings and played their guitars and drums, respectively, like they were oblivious to the fact that every arm, leg, and finger movement was being silently analyzed and worshipped by the cluster of awkwardly silent virgin male teenagers crowding in front of them. Justin referred to Nick, the bassist, as "the limp noodle" because of his loose, wiggly stage presence. I believe this was somehow meant as a

compliment, but the rationale escapes me now. We loved that band.

After a few months of nervous spectating, Bede got an important call from The Push. Poor Old Lu was scheduled to play that weekend but had to cancel at the last minute. Could we play in their place? Of course! The next best thing to sharing a bill with your favorite band was to fill in for your favorite band, right? We said yes.

I don't remember much about the show, other than the fact that I was probably out of my mind on a psychedelic mixture of sleeplessness, fear, and bottled water. I do remember afterward, though, when an unfamiliar guy came up to me and introduced himself. He said he drove all the way there to see Poor Old Lu and was planning to leave in disappointment when the promoter (a hulking, tattooed, pierced, gentle giant of a man called Mikee) basically strong-armed him into staying to see us instead. His name was Brent Knopf, and I was immediately convinced he was romantically interested in me. I was such a homophobe. Regardless, I said yes to meeting him for tea the next week.

Brent and I kept in touch over the next five years as he traveled Europe, wrote feminist musicals, invented instruments, and graduated from an Ivy League school. Not to be outdone, I lived with my dad, played in Bede (we were finally

evolving from Christianized Pearl Jam ripoffs to Christianized Radiohead ripoffs), and held down a minimum-wage job at a beauty supply warehouse in the suburbs. When Brent finally moved back to Portland in 2000, Justin and I needed no convincing to drop everything and start a new band together. Thank you, Poor Old Lu.

## ABOUT DANNY

When he's not writing for Soundcheck or spending quality time with his pug, Geddy Lee, Danny is the drummer for Menomena and also works on his solo project, Lackthereof.

Go here to catch up on Danny's column:

<http://www.soundcheckmagazine.com/columns/artists-perspective>

Menomena  
<http://www.menomena.com>

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words by Elliot Cole

Somewhere in the smoke-filled confines of a nondescript building on the University of Texas campus, you'll find studio 6-A, longtime home to KLRU-TV's *Austin City Limits*. That's where Producer Terry Lickona has been operating since 1978, playing host to everybody from Willie Nelson to Arcade Fire. He's been called the man with the best job in the world, having taken charge of the longest-running American concert program and growing it into a preeminent platform for legends and upstarts alike. Formerly the bastard cousin of Nashville's country scene, the show found its legs on the alt-country scene that was happening in and around Austin. Now 34 seasons in, *Austin City Limits* has more credibility, range, and resonance than ever before. The 2008 season alone features the likes of R.E.M., Foo Fighters, Erykah Badu, My Morning Jacket, and Manu Chao, and in 2010, the PBS-aired program will move into a brand-new studio complex in downtown Austin.

Before the taping of My Morning Jacket's performance, Lickona is surprisingly relaxed, but, then again, he's done this about 800 times by now. He is likewise articulate and disarming, speaking about the show with an air of modest pride. Lickona is fortunate enough to focus on the art rather than the business, but he understands the program's implications, both in the annals of music history as well as its future.

**Soundcheck Magazine:** *This is the second time My Morning Jacket is playing Austin City Limits. What makes them such a perfect fit?*

**Terry Lickona:** Well, first of all, it is pretty unusual to have a band come back so soon. Every time almost any artist that comes to do the show, they want to know when they can come back. It's generally a really positive experience for everybody, and that's one of the cool things about it. We tend to have sort of an unofficial rule: we tend to wait three or four years before we invite somebody to come back to do the show.

In terms of why they are such a good fit, people always ask me, "What's the criteria for somebody to do *Austin City Limits*?" And I like to say originality, to me, is the most important criteria. If somebody has something unique or original to express, whether it's through songwriting, through their instrumental virtuosity, or singing, then that's the kind of music that we like to showcase. And, frankly, they've got all of those.

The show, of course, has evolved since we started 34 years ago. If it hadn't evolved, we wouldn't be here. We have to reinvent ourselves and stay relevant. We certainly don't ignore our roots, but we've gotta stay relevant to what's happening today. That's what makes music so vibrant and so alive. So they really do, in a lot of ways, seem like the perfect fit for *Austin City Limits* in the 21st century.

**SM:** *How often do you bring acts in based on your own fandom, and how often is it based on marketability?*

**TL:** There is sort of a middle ground, but we're so unique and lucky that we don't have to get obsessed over marketability or demo or ratings or numbers or that sort of thing. One of the coolest things about my job – which is why a lot of people say I have probably the best job in this business, if not in the world – is I can book these shows without ever having to worry about negotiating money. People just come here to play for the same scale. Whether it's [My] Morning Jacket or R.E.M. or anybody, they get the same few hundred dollars. Nobody even asks anymore how much the money is. And I never have any pressure from either PBS or from our sponsors – un-

derwriters, as they call them on PBS – as to who I should book or not. So it's pretty much left up to me with a lot of input and advice from – believe me, I get plenty of advice from my staff, from people on my street, people in the audience, [concert organizer/promoter] C3, my plumber, you know, everybody has an opinion on who we should have on the show and why haven't you had so and so. "Why can't I get tickets, too?" That's the other hardest part.

So it really comes down to coming up with the right mix. It's not whether it's marketable or, you know, it's gonna reach the biggest audience or get us the highest ratings. It's "What is the right balance for the show from one year to the next?" We don't just wanna book all indie acts that [are] out there and fill up a whole season with indie music or alternative music or whatever. We want to make sure that we have a fairly good mix [among] genres, among male/females, some of the roots music that's always been a traditional of the show, but also what's new. What's really exciting people out there.

**SM:** *I hear you have Erykah Badu coming.*

**TL:** She's gonna come tape a show during our festival weekend, the day before she plays the [Austin City Limits] fest. She's somebody I've been trying to get for 10 years. Probably one of the biggest challenges I've had in booking shows is getting strong, female talent to come and perform.

**SM:** *Is that a little surprising for you?*

**TL:** In a way it sort of is, but, you know, historically, it's always been more of a struggle for women in general in popular music in terms of establishing success and credibility in business terms ... But I've been trying to get her to do the show for a long time, and with this new record she's got out this year, it seems like the motivation for her to come and do; though she just lives in Dallas, so she's not that far away. This might be the most eclectic season that we've done ... maybe ever. I'm genuinely as excited or the most excited about this year than any in a long time. People like Erykah, people like R.E.M., people like Manu Chao have been on my hit list, so to speak, for years. They all seem to be coming through for this year. I tried to book Gnarl's Barkley last year, that didn't happen, so we decided they were coming. Foo Fighters, now that's the type of show that will definitely get us a huge audience. But it's cool when a band like that, or like Coldplay, or R.E.M. ... they care enough, and they get it well enough to know that it's special instead of doing it for the money or because it's network TV.

**SM:** *I would imagine these are things that keep a band going. They need this, not just to break the monotony of touring but to spark the artistic element of it.*

**TL:** Sure. [My] Morning Jacket, the fact that they have so much affection for the show and respect for what we've done is very gratifying for us. A band like Coldplay, I'm not sure if they had ever even heard of *Austin City Limits* or had ever seen it. They don't live here, and when they're here, they are constantly on tour. But they at least knew about it peripherally or they had been told about it, and once they heard about it, they got it. They knew what it was all about and the reputation that it had. Jim [James of My Morning Jacket] and these guys grew up watching the show, and their awareness goes back a long time.

I was surprised when we taped Pixies – about three or four years ago now – and I remember first time I called their manager when they were getting

back together and playing their first reunion. I didn't even have a clue if they had even heard of the show. I thought they would probably go, "What? A PBS show? In the middle of Texas? Why would we want to do that?" But their manager called me back in like 15 minutes and said, "This is the most excited I've heard Frank [Black, aka Black Francis, of the Pixies] since they decided they were going to play shows together." Because he used to watch it with his grandmother, seeing Leonard Cohen on the show like 20-something years ago. We're on at least our third generation of fans and artists, talent. A lot of who[m] weren't even born when it all started, but that's cool.

**SM:** *When did this become a viable thing for you? When did you feel it take off as a successful endeavor?*

**TL:** Well, yea, there were some mile markers along the way that seemed to indicate that it was going to be around for a while. I didn't have anything to do with the beginning of the show; I can't claim any credit for the original concept. I came in during Season 3 as an assistant to the producer. And the year after I started as an assistant, the producer left. Actually there was like a wholesale departure: the producer, director, executive producer all left at the end of Season 3 to go on to do other things. Nobody really expected that this was going to last. "Oh it'd be fun for a few years, but we can't build a career out of this! We've better go find some permanent job."

But I stuck with it, and frankly, in my first year as a producer – not that I'm trying to pat myself on the back too much – but it was obvious by then that the show couldn't just sustain itself on the local Austin talent. Especially back in the [19]70s, the progressive, alternative country thing that was happening here that was sort of a challenge to the Nashville, cut and dry country music. So, right away one of my first bookings, my first year as producer, was Tom Waits. That kind of shook things up or made people wake up and wonder what was going on. This was a different direction. And the next year after that, my second year as producer, I booked Ray Charles. And, to me, having him ... he was definitely at the top of his game at the time, and being able to convince him to come and do our show – again, at the same scale that we paid everybody else – was the validation that I think we had *arrived*. At some level of success and respectability, credibility, whatever you want to call it.

**SM:** *And breadth, really.*

**TL:** Right. It was – not to put anybody down from our early years – it was just a huge leap from people like Asleep at the Wheel and Marcia Ball. People who are still very incredible, but to go to Ray Charles and then Roy Orbison and then Johnny Cash and B.B. King. I realized quickly that, compared to my first year as a producer when I had to call and explain what the show [was] – I'd get responses like, "Oh, we don't do access cable shows. This is some local TV." – I didn't have to spend so much time explaining what it was.

**SM:** *After awhile, they were calling you.*

**TL:** [Laughs] I still have to call the big ones. And still have to work to book the show. They quickly got it, and even when Johnny Cash came to do the show, he stood backstage, and he was actually kind of nervous before he went out. And it was like, "Why would Johnny Cash be nervous to go on *Austin City Limits*?" And I asked him if he needed something and he said [twangy, drawn out voice], "I'm alright, but this is a real music show, and I just want to make sure I do it right." I was like, "Whoa." Between Seasons 4 and 10, it was at that time when the show really came of age and achieved that kind of recognition, which it just continues to build on.

**SM:** *Something I've been impressed by is how it's still very Austin, even the backdrop. You do realize how much it's perceived as an Austin thing?*

**TL:** We had a really nondescript, generic backdrop until about Season 6, when we came up with that current backdrop basically as a change. But once we came up with that look, it was like, "Why would we change it?" It speaks so loud and clear about what it is: it's *Austin City Limits*.

Hard to believe, but there have been times over the years where we'd have somebody over at PBS and in their infinite wisdom they would say, "Maybe you need to change the name of the show, because *Austin City Limits* sounds too regional. Maybe if you just called it *City Limits*, it would have more appeal." But these people don't realize that Austin is part of the appeal. And it goes beyond the artists that come to do the show. Austin is recognized as a cool city.

The fact that we've been able to sustain this TV show for 34 years certainly has continued to help reinforce that image, that impression of Austin as the music scene and just as a cool place. I had a guy from San Diego who moved here to work, and he said, "I had all these job offers, but one of the reasons I decided to move to Austin is because I just kept watching your show, and it looked like a fun place to live. And people in the audience just seemed really happy to be there, you know?" So it's had this subliminal effect and encouraging musicians and other artistic people to want to be here as part of the scene. So it's been a great ... "synergy" is overused, but it really does apply in this case. Helping reinforce that impression and perception of people have of Austin, but at the same time our show wouldn't have succeeded all these years without that natural energy coming from Austin.

**SM:** *So the main intention of the new building is to just have more space?*

**TL:** It's just going to take the show to a different level. I do have mixed feelings about leaving our longtime home here, but it's still basically just a studio. But we have worked really hard for the last two years to design and create a space that is going to capture the same vibe that we have here. In fact, it's going to be the same exact size as that room, but – believe it or not – it's going to be able to accommodate four times as many people. We'll have a balcony that we can use or not use at our discretion. When we started taping shows here, we used to have as many as 900 people. But the place was not designed for a crowd, for a studio audience. So we had to keep cutting back over the years, and the fire marshal kept reinterpreting the fire code. It went back from 900 to 700 to 500, and then today it's like 300. But we could physically accommodate more people in there than they would allow. And there are times when we do certain shows when it would be nice to have a little more energy than just 300 people in the room. And believe me, there are certainly more people than that that would like to be here tonight. We have had to really beat back and hold back people to keep people from knocking down the doors here. Even more than R.E.M.

**SM:** *I guess it's a matter if the history is infused within the program itself, or if it's the actual place.*

**TL:** Well we're going to keep the stage. That's the one piece of history in that room that we wouldn't want to leave behind. Otherwise, the walls, the floor, the bleachers are relatively new. We take that stage that so many people have stood on over the years. I think being in downtown will be the right place to be at the right time. [We are] partnering with [concert producer] Live Nation and turning it into a year-round music venue so that they can do shows year round. And create the same kind of atmosphere that we've got in that room. And give us the capabilities – since we'll have a state-of-the-art, high-definition production facility married to a full-time music venue – that we can tape our show, maybe create new programs, new series, either for broadcast or for the Web. Or stream some of the Live Nation shows. So there's all types of possibilities. The trick is to keep that same vibe that we've got going here. If we don't get it right, we'll never hear the end of it.

Because musicians don't just make music, MXMO (Musicians By Modus Operandi) focuses on the hobbies, habits, side-projects, and signature idiosyncrasies of the artists we love and respect. In this installment, John Gourley, singer/guitarist for Portugal. The Man, discusses his visual art.

**Soundcheck Magazine:** *Everything I read about your art mentions science fiction and Alaska, without fail. Everything written about you in general mentions Alaska, too – but in your art, these seem to be the go-to “influences.” Are you sick of those two talking points?*

**John Gourley:** Well, I love Alaska, so I don't really mind talking about Alaska. ... It is pretty fully [relevant]. It's funny, lately I've been going back and finding all these animated films I watched when I was a young kid. It's really amazing finding them now. I lived in a really small town called Knik, and it's 20 miles outside of Wasilla. And then we moved around randomly – throughout my childhood, anyway. But all these video stores, for some reason, when they would put these films into the sections, the family sections – movies like *[The] Fantastic Planet* and *Light Years* and *Fire and Ice* and *Wizards*, and they were just really, really amazing. These crazy stories, full of death ... Full of this crazy, futuristic, 'everybody's dead and dying' world ...

Yeah, it's pretty nuts, going back to that stuff. I can completely see where everything I do comes from – I mean, *everything* I do is based on all those things I watched when I was younger. ... Like, I watched *2001: A Space Odyssey* when I was really little, and that movie just blew my mind. That movie still blows my mind.

**SM:** *But you got it as a kid? It didn't freak you out or alienate you?*

**JG:** No, no. See, I didn't get any of it as a kid. (Laughs) Just these amazing stories – I think they all just stuck with me over time. And slowly, I understood them a little bit more. Going back to it is just a lot of fun, because I can remember what I was thinking as I was watching it. Obviously, I'm catching a little bit more now.

**SM:** *I wasn't sure what people meant when they said ‘sci-fi’ influenced you – that phrase doesn't narrow it down a whole lot.*

**JG:** Yeah, it's mostly the animated sci-fi that I watched when I was younger. And that pretty much grew into everything from that point out. Of course, I'm going to space on them now. But *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* ... *Star Trek* is, the original *Star Trek* – and even *The Next Generation* – is just amazing. But the original was just *The Twilight Zone* ... in space. I mean, none of the episodes were relative to the coming episodes; it was just, 'Something fucked-up is going to happen ...' (laughs) '... and we have to figure it out.' And you get the bonus of being in space for all of it. So, yeah. I'd say *Star Trek* is pretty huge, as well.

**SM:** *Did you ever get into the 1980s classics like, say, Dark Crystal or Labyrinth?*

**JG:** Yeah – I was really into that stuff. Fantasy movies, as well. Those were always really good. Jim Henson has been my hero since I was a little kid. Always, always, always. I remember when I was younger, when he died – I don't even remember when he died – I think it was late '80s, because I was able to read. I remember picking up a magazine and reading that he had everyone wear white suits to his funeral, because he didn't want anyone to be sad. He didn't want any black there. He wanted it to be like a fun party. And I thought that was one of the coolest things I'd read, just

even heard.

And, yeah – I think that whole thing, Jim Henson (chuckles), in turn, really changed my view on death and things like that.

**SM:** *It seems like there are some recurring themes in your art, like fertility, pregnancy, animals, et cetera.*

**JG:** Yeah, I guess somewhat. Yeah, honestly, it's like everything I do, anyway – I just kind of let it come out and go where it goes. There are definitely themes that come around. A lot of the themes come out of learning how to do it right and fully be able to do what I'm doing ... a lot of that is just trial and error. I just get it, I'm done with it, and I throw it in the back. But yeah, I'm guessing a lot of that stuff – (chuckles) I have to guess on where that stuff comes from – yeah, a lot of it is just *Light Years* and movies like that. It's just crazy.

**SM:** *What outlets do you have for your visual art, other than your album art and merch designs?*

**JG:** I used to do a lot of shirts for other bands and a lot of artwork for other people, until we started touring all the time. I mean, really, everything I do is so on-the-spot, just always, just given away ... holy *shit*. I forgot to mail out those posters. (He turns and talks to the tour manager.)

... There [are] posters for the new record – they're supposed to go out *today*.

Yeah, everything I've done has just been given away. I do it *for* people, *for* a reason. I've never hold on to anything. Especially over in Germany, they ask me to do shows all the time, like art shows, and, uh – yeah, I just don't hold on to anything, so it's hard to do an art show if you have nothing to show. If I ever do an art show, I'll sit down specifically to do art for that, and then I just leave it.

**SM:** *What is your preferred medium?*

**JG:** I really like inks. Mainly watercolor, I guess. I like using a lot of different things. It's just – watercolor is just the most fun. I just like to see what colors kind of expand and roll around. (Laughs) It's more fun for me to look at when I'm doing it.

**SM:** *What was your formal training like?*

**JG:** Aside from school and high school and ... I had always done it. But nah, I wouldn't say it's anything I necessarily learned [formally] – just from doing it with friends and things like that. I more or less pick up everything from doing it with friends.

**SM:** *But you actively sought it out in high school? As opposed to just taking what was required?*

**JG:** Yeah. Yeah, of course. I'd rather take an art class over ... whatever else they were offering. 'Small engines.' (Laughs) I had to take small engines before. It was crazy.

**SM:** *That's a real class?*

**JG:** Yeah. It wasn't bad. It was actually really funny to sit down and realize there is *nothing* to an engine. And I have no idea how they work, still, but it's just, like – this mass of metal. (Chuckles) It's super funny.

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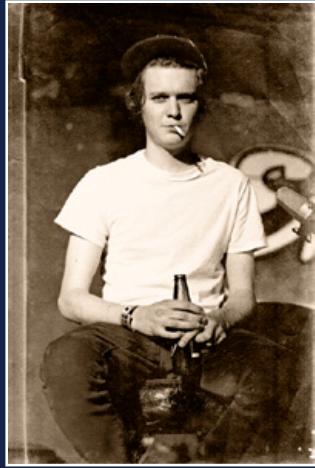
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