

Fanfarlo Blind Pilot Heartless Bastards The Soldier Thread Quiet Company

SOUND CHECK

connecting the artist and the audience



GRIZZLY
BEAR

ISSUE 21

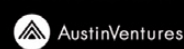
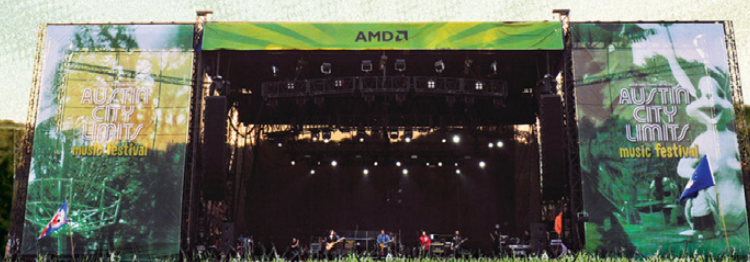
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Quiet Company
photo by Leah Muse

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Molly, The Soldier Thread



Ben Gibbard of Death Cab For
Cutie performs at Austin Music
Hall.

photo by Randy Cremean



Twenty-One

Twenty-one is a magical number in our culture. It is a symbol of luck and a signifier of maturity. To reach this, our twenty-first issue, we've needed a bit of both. As the economy sank to abysmal depths, many of our brethren in the music magazine business closed up shop. Some are soliciting donations and even stalwarts, once thought to be unsinkable, are finding it difficult to stay afloat. At Soundcheck, we had to do a lot of soul-searching. We've never been in this for the money, but the magazine needed to at least pay for itself to remain viable. We stopped printing to reduce costs; a very painful decision. The magazine was the physical embodiment of our work and our passion. It was substantive and an integral part of our self-identity. As such, the decision to not print could only come after a maturing of how we viewed the Big Picture. We love music. We love going to concerts. We love talking to musicians. If we wanted to continue doing what we love on a professional basis, sacrifices were going to have to be made. Egos would have to be put aside. Taking inspiration from the words of President Obama, we sought the opportunity within adversity. A new website was built to showcase our refocused dedication to covering live music, interviewing artists and sharing our favorite music. Issue 20 was published digitally and viewed by people all over the world. Now, with the release of Issue 21, we find we've not only survived, but have emerged stronger, wiser and more appreciative of the wonderful music that inspires us.

We caught up with our cover artists, Grizzly Bear, on a too bright Thursday morning during SXSW. Despite the early hours, they were gracious and as lovely as the songs on their new album, *Veckatimest*. Seated on a patio with bird calls and music from day shows reverberating off the facade of the hotel, it was an appropriate setting for a discussion of acoustics and the band's philosophy on songcraft. In a year overflowing with excellent releases, *Veckatimest* is a standout and should be enjoyed as follows: Clear an hour on your schedule, find a quiet, relaxing place to sit, put on some headphones and listen to the album straight through. You know, like people used to listen to music. Attentive listeners will be greatly rewarded.

Both Fanfarlo and Blind Pilot were hits at our 3rd Birthday Bash during SXSW. While the Fanfarlo interview was over a year in the making, Blind Pilot crept up on us and quickly became one of our favorite bands. Heartless Bastards are having a breakout year with a critically-acclaimed album, an appearance on Letterman and a busy tour with stops at Bonnaroo, Lollapalooza and ACL Fest. Quiet Company and The Soldier Thread are two Austin bands we expect great things from this year.

Twenty-one! An exultation, affirmation and proclamation. As we celebrate this publication and this moment in time, we wish you luck and the power grow; to continuously reach beyond your grasps and have the courage to change.

Randy Cremean
Director of Photography & Design

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"Connecting the artist and the audience."

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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Frank Erwin Center - Austin, TX
Nine Inch Nails
 Trent Reznor
 Tuesday, May 12, 2009
 photo by Randy Cremean



Frank Erwin Center - Austin, TX
Nine Inch Nails
 Trent Reznor
 Tuesday, May 12, 2009
 photo by Randy Cremean



Frank Erwin Center - Austin, TX

**Street Sweeper
Social Club**

Tom Moreello

Tuesday, May 12, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean



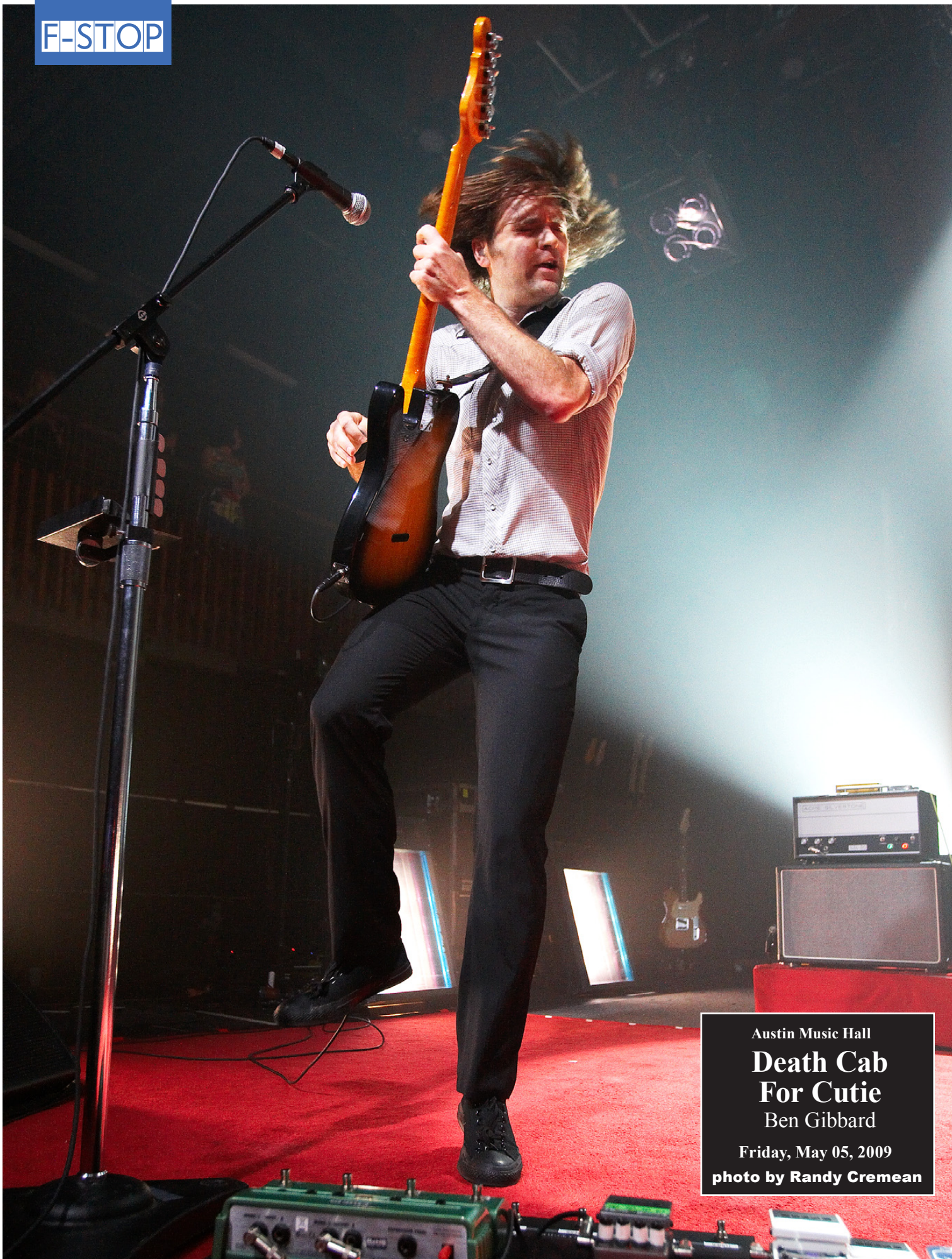
Frank Erwin Center - Austin, TX

Jane's Addiction

Perry Farrell

Tuesday, May 12, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean



Austin Music Hall
**Death Cab
 For Cutie**
 Ben Gibbard
 Friday, May 05, 2009
 photo by Randy Cremean



La Zona Rosa - Austin, TX
Franz Ferdinand
 Alex Kapranos
 Saturday, April 25, 2009
 photo by Randy Cremean



The Chicago Theatre
Leonard Cohen
Saturday, April 5, 2009
photo by Nate Lanthrum



Stubb's - Austin, TX
Neko Case
Tuesday, March 31, 2009
photo by Randy Cremean



Stubb's - Austin, TX
Modest Mouse
Isaac Brock
Wednesday, March 4, 2009
photo by Randy Cremean



Stubb's - Austin, TX

Matt & Kim

Kim Schifino

Friday, March 6, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean



Stubb's - Austin, TX

Cut Copy

Dan Whitford

Friday, March 6, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean

Stubb's - Austin, TX

Shearwater

Kim Burke

Tuesday, March 31, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean



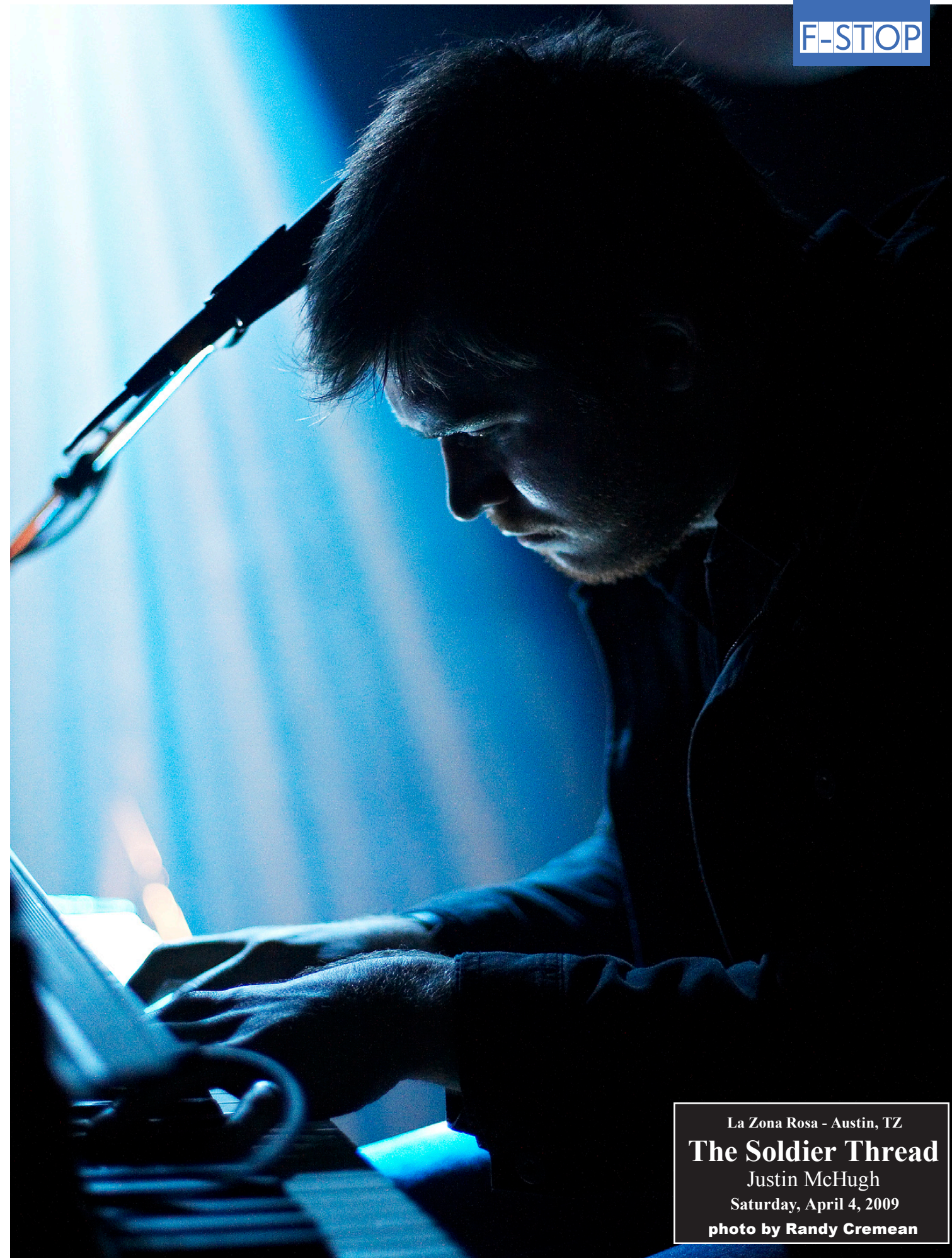
La Zona Rosa - Austin, TX

The Soldier Thread

Justin McHugh

Saturday, April 4, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean





Radio Room - Austin, TX

The Handsome Furs

Dan Boeckner & Alexi Perry

Saturday, April 4, 2009

photo by Randy Cremean



Mess With Texas 3
**King Khan
& The Shrines**
Sunday, March 21, 2009
photo by Randy Cremean



Stubb's - Austin, TX
The Decemberists
Colin Meloy
Wednesday, March 18, 2009
photo by Victor Yiu



Stubb's - Austin, TX
Flogging Molly
Dave King
Saturday, Feb. 28, 2009
photo by Randy Cremean



Mohawk - Austin, TX
Peelander-Z
Peeland Red
Saturday, March 21, 2009
photo by Victor Yiu

FANFARLO

On Their Own Terms

words by Elliot Cole
photos by Randy Cremean



Simon Balthazar is scanning a menu, and he's completely overwhelmed. The lanky, fair-skinned Swede is contorting the laminated sheet in his hands, trying his damndest to discern the differences between enchiladas, quesadillas, and flautas, but his bandmates are offering little help. Violinist/keyboardist Cathy Lucas already has picked the first thing that shouted vegetarian, while the other members have settled on random orders that, for Balthazar, all are completely alien. Assured that they all are variations of the rice-beans-and-tortillas formula, the Fanfarlo frontman orders something with a waxing confidence, hoping mostly that he just doesn't fuck it up.

Of course, this is just one of several indoctrinations that London-based Fanfarlo has had in its time stateside. The previous night, while staying with a friend before Austin's South by Southwest festival, the band experienced what some would call a Texas rite-of-passage: firing guns openly on rural land, aiming for nothing but the stars. The recording of their debut album, *Reservoir*, was caked with similar oddities. The group — Balthazar, Lucas, multi-instrumentalist Leon Beckenham, bassist Justin Finch, and drummer Amos Memon — recorded in Connecticut with Peter Katis at a house that previously was owned by a cult.

"[Katis and his family] still had really weird people come and knock on the door and start talking to them," Balthazar said. "Because it used to be this open house. You could just walk in and get fed. People would just walk in and steal stuff, as well. So a lot of weirdness."

But it's not as though weirdness wasn't a factor back home in London. The group formed in 2006 when Balthazar came to London with an assortment of demos and was looking to put together a band. When the group finally organized, they rehearsed in a rather shady warehouse in an industrial region of town, close to

Memon's work.

"It was pretty special getting there," said Balthazar, with a grin. "[It took] a bit of everything: different modes of transport and then this road that led up to it with all these kind of dumped cars on it."

Their shifting eyes tell the story: It wasn't where you would think to find one of the U.K.'s most in-demand unsigned bands.

Despite the adventures, the underlying thread of Fanfarlo is how much control the band has exercised over its career to this point. A team of managers and agents watch over their every step during SXSW, advising them how to budget their time and, occasionally, what to order off the menu. But Fanfarlo still released *Reservoir* independently, although most bands would sign along the dotted line with a quarter of the hype that the band has received since releasing demos years ago.

They became a darling of the blogosphere, an ambitious, orchestral band with soft melodies, swift harmonies, and brushes of indie rock bliss. With diverse instrumentation (members revolve between trumpet, saxophones, mandolins, melodicas, and just about anything else they can get their hands on), the group has a detailed-but-accessible style. The demos gave evidence of a band that had a natural tendency toward whimsicality but with the potential for the grandiose. The Net started taking notice, and Fanfarlo became a proverbial buzz band.

"What's funny and what kind of really shocked me a bit [was that] when it was ready and we started dropping bits of information, people would actually have, like, five people repeat things like, 'Fanfarlo wrote in their mailouts that the title of the record is such-and-such!' and, 'Here's the fucking tracklist!' " Balthazar said. "I didn't think people did that before."

That blogosphere buzz also led to opportunity. The band was tabbed by Gary Lightbody of Snow Patrol to open a few dates in the U.K.,



“We’re pretty big on really sort of keeping control of what we’re doing. So far, we haven’t worked with a label, and that’s for a reason. We’ve been holding out. We’ve been doing everything super, super slow. But it’s worth it. We don’t feel like we want to compromise. It’s so much more about the music than the career.” - Simon Balthazar

playing to massive audiences. Although modest by comparison, more than a few people at SXSW had their ears perked for the band that long had been touted as an up-and-comer.

But that’s the strangest part of Fanfarlo: They’ve had amazing patience, despite being pinpointed by the online community years ago.

“We’re pretty big on really sort of keeping control of what we’re doing,” Balthazar said. “So far, we haven’t worked with a label, and that’s for a reason. We’ve been holding out. We’ve been doing everything super, super slow. But it’s worth it. We don’t feel like we want to compromise. It’s so much more about the music than the career.”

As slow as the group wants to keep it, *Reservoir* might not give them much of a chance. It’s brimming with memorable swoops of orchestral whimsicality, a sound that’s hard to ignore.

“I guess it was sort of this sonically intense, sort of big, spine-tingling sound,” Finch said when discussing the direction that the band took with its sound. “Everyone keeps bringing up Arcade Fire, obviously, but it’s that sort of thing. It’s that sort of total folky, rootsy base. There’s just so much going on. That was always our point.”

Now, with a tangible album released, the band is going to have to exercise more control than ever. Instead of trying to hide from label representatives and blogosphere magnifying lenses, the band has to embrace it. Memon says the road that lies ahead is “not daunting.”

“There’s challenges, and we like to meet them head-on,” he said.

“We do hate the press, though,” Lucas joked.

This is, in a nutshell, a good cross-section of Fanfarlo. They are charming and witty but very careful with their words. Memon, Lucas, and Balthazar are conversational and soft-spoken, but at the same time, they are excitable, animated, and eager to talk about their music. Finch, perhaps the most talkative of the group, sports thick glasses, suspenders, and boots, lending himself to a more punk aesthetic that seems out of place in the otherwise clean-cut band. He rolls his own cigarettes and makes jovial poses for cameras. Despite individuality like this, the bandmates flow off each other perfectly, although this wasn’t always the case. During recording, guitarist Mark West departed from the band.

“We lost a member,” Balthazar said.

“We still don’t know where he is,” Finch laughed. “He’s still lost.”

“That’s when we really worked out who we wanted to be: through the process of recording,” Lucas said.

The lineup shift (ultimately chalked up to “musical and aesthetic differences”) hasn’t affected the dynamic of the band. In fact, it’s drawn them together. It also sheds some light on how tight Fanfarlo is. They have worked hard to keep their destiny in their own hands, and it’s revealing to the extent that nothing has been able to dent their carefully crafted status as one of the most anticipated unsigned bands in the U.K. In a matter of time, the label deal, stadium opening slots, and worldwide travel all will come, but, for Fanfarlo, they get to say when.



HEARTLESS BASTARDS

Climb *The Mountain*

words by Callie Enlow
photos by Randy Cremean

The bar at the Heartless Bastards show is pretty crowded for San Antonio on a Thursday night. The lone bartender bravely stands against a tidal wave of Lonestar Light-ordering music lovers. In her flurry of bottle opening, the bartender misses one soft voice in the barrage of people.

"Scuse me," says Heartless Bastards lead singer Erika Wennerstrom. The bartender brushes her off. The petite Wennerstrom tries again, balancing on the balls of her feet.

"Scuse me." Wennerstrom glances apologetically at bandmates Dave Colvin, Jesse Ebaugh and Mark Nathan, who have been playing together in support of the latest critically acclaimed Heartless Bastards album, *The Mountain*. When the bartender finally gets around to her, Wennerstrom smiles, embarrassed, and says, "I'm sorry, it's just, we're playin' soon," and gestures to the waiting stage. Minutes later, Wennerstrom heads to the stage with a shot and a Miller Lite.

Maybe she was saving her voice, but the one Wennerstrom uses on stage sounds nothing like the soft, hoarse lilt she speaks with. In fact, it sounds nothing like any other vocals on today's airwaves. Although Wennerstrom couldn't catch a break at the bar, the first song knocked out the audience at Sam's Burger Joint, a mid-sized venue in San Antonio.



Wennerstrom’s unabashedly low and tension-fraught voice has been garnering praise for the past five years, since the release of the Heartless Bastards’ first album, *Stairs and Elevators*, in 2005. That year, Rolling Stone proclaimed Wennerstrom’s pipes to be those of a “rock goddess” while Village Voice went with “totally arresting.” The group’s next effort, *All This Time*, ironically released a mere year later, garnered a high rating from Pitchfork, who described Wennerstrom’s delivery as “gale-force,” and mused that the band sounded, “like giants tied to the earth.”

At least two reviews pointed out that Wennerstrom’s vocals could benefit from more nuance in the instrumental department. While the band chugged through garage rock and Midwestern blues on *Stairs and Elevators* and experimented with psychedelic progressions on *All This Time*, combined with Wennerstrom’s vocals and anxious lyrics, songs hit listeners with the subtlety of a frying pan to the head.

It seems fortunate now that a break-up with Heartless Bastards bassist and boyfriend Mike Lamping inspired Wennerstrom to leave the group in Ohio, taking their band name and an album’s worth of her own material to Austin in late 2007.

“I split from a 10-year relationship and we have a lot of the same friends, so it seemed like it was going to be easier to deal with going somewhere else,” Wennerstrom said matter-of-factly via phone as she and the band lounged at Red’s Scoot Inn, a bar on Austin’s East side. “I have family here and friends I’ve met over the years of touring, and my management is here. I also had already made the decision to work with Mike McCarthy on *The Mountain*. So, it just made sense.”

After holing up with family and collecting her thoughts, Wennerstrom discovered that her old bandmate Colvin – who drummed in Shesus with Wennerstrom – was pursuing a master’s degree in jazz at University of Texas.

Colvin says he never imagined working with Wennerstrom again “until she showed up next to me at a Dr. Dog concert out of the blue” in Austin.

Wennerstrom recruited another Ohio musician, Ebaugh, to play bass.

“I’ve been listening to Erika sing for a long time,” Ebaugh said. “When she called me to ask me to come down and play, she didn’t leave me a voice mail, but ... I knew what she was going to ask, and I pretty much knew what I was going to say.”

Nathan joined the band after acting as their soundman in fall 2008. Although he joined the touring group most recently, Nathan is the only one credited with working on *The Mountain*; Colvin and Ebaugh joined Heartless Bastards in summer 2008, after the album was complete.

Another important character in the band’s recent history is Mike McCarthy, favored producer of Spoon and ...And You Will Know Us By the Trail of Dead. Wennerstrom said she had been a fan of McCarthy since hearing Trail of Dead’s 2002 release *Source Tags and Codes*. Apparently, the fandom was mutual.

“He had heard us on an NPR show at some point during the last album [2006’s *All This Time*] release,” Wennerstrom said of McCarthy, “and had heard we were from Cincinnati, which is where he’s originally from, and I think that sparked his interest.”

According to Wennerstrom, McCarthy tracked down her manager and said he was interested in working with the group. A meeting at Austin’s Side Bar in 2007 between Wennerstrom and McCarthy sealed the deal.

“He seemed just as invested as I was in making this the best album it could be, and that meant a lot to me, versus just seeking out a producer I liked,” Wennerstrom said.

Released this year, *The Mountain* is indeed the Bastards’ best effort yet. The rust belt band’s barroom blues rock and realism-laced lyrics delivered in Wennerstrom’s defiant pitch probably appeal to many Americans who crave songs that let them cry in their beer but also inspire positive determination, as *The Mountain*’s most energetic song, “Early in the Morning” and the slower “Hold Your Head High” detail. Those timely sentiments garnered attention from NPR to CBS and helped the indie album debut at 150 on the Billboard 200 in February. Later that month, the band appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, their national TV debut.

McCarthy flourishes curl around The Mountain, filling out inspiration that Wennerstrom carried from a San Francisco bluegrass festival. To the folksy instrumentation on “So Quiet”, McCarthy added a lilting mandolin to contrast Wennerstrom’s echo-backed vocals. And in a fit of that’s-what-you-pay-me-for brilliance, McCarthy talked Wennerstrom out of lead guitar on the album’s title track and into the pedal steel. The pedal steel’s plaintive tone backs up Wennerstrom’s wails about a consumerist culture gone off the rails.

Even the words have taken on more subtlety, drawing from Wennerstrom’s frustration with

both her relationship and the predatory capitalism that is cited for so much of the world’s current economic woes. “*I packed up and headed / to the City of Light / to escape the pain and for thrills*”, Wennerstrom divulges on the personal “Out at Sea”, while “The Mountain” imagines consumerism as a mountain without a summit.

The polish is welcome, but it can’t unseat the self-taught bareness of Wennerstrom’s compositions and personality of her voice.

“I’ve wanted to do this since I was old enough to want to do anything,” Wennerstrom said. “I might have been between 3 and 5 years old. I was gonna be a singer since I was that young.”

As a kid, Wennerstrom says she would go to her mother’s greenhouse when no one was around to sing where her voice would “echo off the glass like in a church.” When Wennerstrom began playing piano, she also started writing her own lyrics and melodies, and taught herself guitar after dropping out of high school.

“I just started telling myself, ‘Well, I need to learn this thing and do what I’ve wanted to do my whole life because I’m not in school now, and if I’m going to do this, now’s the time,’ ” Wennerstrom said. Inspired by the verdant indie scene of 1990s Ohio (Brainiac, Breeders and Guided By Voices, to name a few), Wennerstrom bartended and immersed herself in the rock landscape.

Instead of taking lessons or hammering out other people’s work, Wennerstrom wrote her own songs on the guitar to teach herself to play. For that reason, she says she’s not much of a pick-up player, even if the requestor is Lucinda Williams.

“When we toured with Lucinda Williams, she asked if I’d be into playing guitar on ‘Joy’, and her stage manager ended up showing me the chords so I could play an additional rhythm,” Wennerstrom said. “I couldn’t just freestyle.”

The only cover Heartless Bastards play is departed bluesman (and Fat Possum labelmate) Junior Kimbrough’s “Done Got Old”, a song that nearly stops the Sam’s Burger Joint crowd in their tracks back in San Antonio.

As Wennerstrom sails her emotional lyrics over her band’s gnarled blues rock and dusty folk, the San Antonio crowd grin more and more appreciatively, for the most part staying respectfully quiet for a bar crowd. With this kind of respect, Wennerstrom definitely will grab the bartender’s attention next time – and anyone else’s who is within earshot.



THE SOLDIER THREAD

Opportunity Knocks

words by Elliot Cole
photos by Randy Cremean



“Twenty-seven. I shit you not.” Justin McHugh, principal songwriter, singer, and keyboardist for Austin quintet The Solider Thread, is discussing how it is crucial for his band to emerge from the clouded Austin scene before he becomes another member of the fabled 27 Club, a collection of musicians who died of mostly enigmatic means at age 27.

His wry smile suggests that he is joking about being a future member of a group that includes Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin, but he exudes an underlining confidence nonetheless. It’s not that McHugh already is etching his name in the annals of rock legacy; he simply recognizes that The Solider Thread is on the cusp of opportunity, and he doesn’t want to waste a second of it.

It’s a warm, somewhat muggy night on the upper porch of the evening’s venue, but the entire band has gathered early to kill time before the set. Collectively, they are baby faced and eager, if not a little shy. Guitarist Todd Abels – who formed the band with McHugh in Dallas before relocating to Austin – is shaggy-haired and subtle, choosing his words carefully as though he were picking them out of a lineup. Drummer Drew Van Diver and the band’s latest addition, bassist Chance Gilmore, bite their tongues for the most part and let others do the talking. Singer/violist Patricia Lynn is the excitable one of the group, carrying a disarming smile that belies the melancholy that soaks most of her lyrics.

In truth, they seem more like close friends than a band, early-20-somethings with shared interests who are more likely to go to a show than perform one. They keep mundane day jobs, from valet parking to university desk work to hauling guitars around a warehouse. (“Valet, it’s the dream job. Over music: valet parking,” Abels quipped.) Various members of the band live together, work together, go to school together (McHugh and Lynn are on the cusp of college graduation), and, among other things, play racquetball together. When asked whether the band could hit a saturation point on interacting, McHugh and Lynn gave a synchronized and passionate “Yes!” before McHugh explained, “Racquetball is actually a good outlet. ... I’ll just



kick her ass at that.”

Somewhere amid all that time they spend together, the group is able to carve out moments for The Soldier Thread, a group with a delicately nuanced sound that re-adjusts shades of matured emo-tinged moodiness with orchestral indie rock dynamics.

“During the week, there is at least one three-hour rehearsal plus a show night,” McHugh said. “So we’re talking at least eight to 10 hours [of working on music] on these days.”

In talking to the group, it becomes apparent that their youth belies their professionalism. They comment on the amount of time they spend refining their sound, penning new songs, or just rehearsing in a practice space on the south side of town. It’s as though the band itches to just play; as though the block of time they are spending waiting for the night’s show to start somehow is eating away at them.



The initial result of their drive is *Shapes*, the band's recently released debut album. It's part Explosions in the Sky, revealing stretches of spacious melodies, while at the same time part Denali, expanding haunting measures with the tense, wounded voice of Lynn. It varies between airy and climactic, using a polished sound to reach colossal pinnacles. Lynn describes the undercurrent of the record as, "A desperation. A longing for or a lack of love or happiness."

"By the end ... by the second-to-last song on the record, I feel like it's so desperate," she said. "But with [the last track] at the very end, I feel like it's the calm at the end of the storm. It's going to be OK."

The instrumentation is a climactic session in dense atmospheres. The sullen strings make the underlying desperation almost tangible. In a word, it's bittersweet: strangely warm through the chill.

"It has that feel to me, like a coldness," Lynn said. "That's kind of why we all wear dark-colored clothing. The music doesn't match rainbow-colored clothing."

Although the group is in the middle of supporting a new album, The Soldier Thread seems more adept at talking about what lies ahead. Despite releasing their debut album a few months ago, McHugh is eager to report that they aren't spending much time looking backward.

"There are always new songs in the works," he said. "We have most of the next record planned out and all."

It's not that McHugh is in a rush – or that the 27-year-old scythe is looming – but that it doesn't seem like he knows what to do other than writing. He defines himself as a musician – and a professional one to boot. Lynn echoes the sentiment: "We're always writing. We're never finished, is the thing. We're constantly writing."

It is an impressive degree of productivity for such a young band, and, most importantly, it's believable. They carry the aura of a band that has been playing for years, but they are charmingly realistic about their goals. There is no naivety of youth, but rather a confidence of expectation.

"Well, it's definitely an artistic release," McHugh said of the band's direction. "But I think the goal, especially now

that [Lynn] and I are graduating, [is that] it's time to make it a career. I think where everyone is on the same page is that in the next three or five years, let's really try to make it. So this is all we do."

"I feel compelled because we have this great opportunity in front of us, and if we don't take the opportunity now, we may never be able to."

– Patricia Lynn

The Soldier Thread seem to collectively understand the frailty of chance, that the window to success might be open only briefly, if at all. It's apparent that the band is training for this window and waiting for the slightest crevice of chance.

"I feel compelled because we have this great opportunity in front of us, and if we don't take the opportunity now, we may never be able to," Lynn said.

It's a notable realization for Lynn and the rest of The Soldier Thread that finding success in music is fleeting. For now, they are patiently penning songs and waiting, be it for opportunity, destiny, or, in McHugh's case, for the dangers of his late 20s.



Leah Muse is reclining in her Austin, Texas, home. The 23-year-old photographer is nine months' pregnant with her first child, and her husband – Quiet Company front man, Taylor Muse – has just placed a pair of headphones on her stomach.

Ten days from the birth of their daughter, Harper Lennon Muse, the young couple has yet to experiment with the popular notion of funneling music directly to their child. There's no doubt that Harper has heard her father's tenor voice bellowing throughout the house as he has tinkered with his guitar. And she surely has been to her share of rock shows, picking up on Quiet Company's buoyant power pop from within her mother's womb.

But this is different, and the Muses are faced with choosing which song will be their baby's first. Taylor Muse has begun writing a number of pieces inspired by his looming fatherhood, but they aren't finished. And with Harper's arrival only a week-and-a-half away, there's no time to wait for the 27-year-old songwriter to finish the tunes. There is no clinical proof that Bach and Mozart raise a child's IQ – even obstetricians are split on the merits of the symphonies – and the soon-to-be parents opt for classic over classical and settle on ELO's "Mr. Blue Sky".

As the opening piano notes give way to those unmistakable stomping drums, Harper kicks. That's all the Muses need to know that they made the right choice.

That 1978 rock concerto was a fitting song for the newest member of the family. Its plush string arrangements aren't completely disjointed from those classical composers, but it's the lyrics such as, "Hey you with the pretty face / Welcome to the human race" that leave this tune booming with new-parent optimism. Taylor Muse's own work comes steeped in this hopefulness. After all, he's the bearded, wiry musician who roamed South by Southwest this year wearing a "Free Hugs" sandwich board. And it's this lust for life – or rather, a love of love – that is funneled through Quiet Company's pair of LPs.

"Family, community, those are the most important things," Muse said, sitting in a rocking chair in the nursery that he painted for his daughter. "We all need a community of friends to encourage us, to keep us going, to hold us accountable, in a way. But really, we just need it for support, and so that we can be someone else's support."

Yet the choice of that decades-old ELO song draws another similarity to Muse's music. It possesses the same jilted accusation of someone who has been let down by religion, asking, "Mr. Blue Sky / Please tell us why / You had to hide away for so long / Where did we go wrong?" It's a song that finds the narrator discovering life's beauty without divine intervention. Coming to grips with worldly pleasures not contingent on spirituality is a sentiment echoed in part on Quiet Company's 2006 debut, *Shine Honestly*, and in full on this year's stellar *Everyone You Love Will Be Happy Soon*. There's a faith in humanity that runs through Taylor Muse's work; on his newest album, it's built on the idea that people are capable of finding the good in things if they just look hard enough. Without

the dark days, the clear ones wouldn't be as memorable, and mankind can recognize those sunny days without any celestial guidance. Or better yet, they can create their own.

"We all need a community of friends to encourage us, to keep us going, to hold us accountable, in a way. But really, we just need it for support, and so that we can be someone else's support."

- Taylor Muse

Raised in a strict Southern Baptist family in East Texas, Muse was forbidden to listen to secular music as a teen. The songs of his youth were those of Christian radio stations and albums available at religious retailers. Artists from the late-1980s wave of spiritual heavy metal – Stryper, White Cross, Bride – were his guitar rock. It wasn't until age 16 that the budding musician began sneaking into a local record shop. Armed with his purchases, Muse would return home much like William Miller in the film *Almost Famous*, concealing the albums before losing himself in them.

"Nirvana summed up everything my mom was worried about, when Kurt Cobain killed himself," Muse said. "Killing himself meant that he was like the devil's apprentice, and it represented everything [my parents] had feared about rock 'n' roll."

His parents' fears didn't stop him from redirecting his teenage fandom from *Star Wars* and graphic novels to music. Those early guitar lessons and secret, after-school stops turned into an obsession that eventually sparked moves to Tennessee, then back to Texas in hopes of launching his career. Along the way, he developed a passion for Kurt Vonnegut stories, fell in love, and stumbled across multi-instrumentalist Tommy Blank. Although the romance with his bride-to-be, and the post-modern science fiction of *Slaughterhouse-Five* were turning points for Muse, it was his collaborations with Blank that has had the biggest effect on Quiet Company's sound. Before Blank's arrival in 2005, the moniker was a vanity title for Muse's solo venture. But the addition of the keyboard/guitarist marked the first step toward a full roster. While the band – which now includes bassist Matt Parmenter and drummer Jeff Weathers – has undergone several lineup changes, Blank and Muse have remained constant.

That stability has freed Muse to devote more time to his lyrics, writing with a confidence that comes with trusting a longtime bandmate to handle any musical arrangements thrown his way.

He’s a decade removed from the days of sneaking things like The Smashing Pumpkins’ *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* and Weezer’s blue album into his bedroom, but the soft-spoken singer’s spiritual side still is displayed through music. Instead of breaking from the church by way of MTV Buzz Clips, today Muse’s skepticism manifests itself in his own lyrics. As a practicing Deist, he believes in a rational argument for a god, just not the supernatural tendency for miracles and the dogma of the God from his youth. And the 15 songs on *Everyone You Love Will Be Happy Soon* play like a quest to reconcile his faith. They tell of a songwriter sure of his disbelief but cautious of his loved one’s judgments.

“When I first heard Quiet Company, I noticed the religious angle,” said Louie Lino, who produced three songs on Quiet Company’s sophomore release. As the sought after audio tech responsible for much of Nada Surf’s studio production and live sounds, Lino knows a sentimental singer with a knack for gorgeous melodies when he hears one. “They’re not a Christian band. But it just seemed like those [references] came out of [Muse] so effortlessly.”

Throughout the hourlong LP, Muse delves deeply into stories of love, sin, and rediscovery, lacing his songs with frequent devout imagery. From tales of a pilgrimage through the desert (“A Nation of Two”) to comparisons between drowning and baptism (“Golden [Like the State]”), this 2009 offering is a record of removing holy blinders. Whether it’s Muse asking any God to bring home troops from the front line and then sarcastically quipping that there are 100 reasons that he’s destined for Heaven (“My New Year’s Resolution at the End of the World”), or vowing to send the devil away if it calls, (“It’s Better to Spend Money Like There’s No Tomorrow, Than Spend Tonight Like There’s No Money”), he rarely preaches. Rather, his Southern Baptist upbringing and subsequent abandonment are such a part of Taylor Muse, that separating who he has become from the path he took to become it would be a disservice to that evolution. So when he laments that the “*flock does grow under these false pretences*” (“The Beginning of Everything at the End of the World”), or when he claims to be “*waiting for the flood to change us*” and wishes that you’d “*climb down off the cross*”, burn it, and share the wood (“How to Fake Like You’re Nice & Caring”), he’s confident in his convictions.

No song in Quiet Company’s canon conveys the way Muse continually wrestles with what he was raised to believe, what he believes, and the way his family relates to them both more than “Congratulations Seth & Kara”. In this thank-you letter to his older brother – a youth minister near Dallas – Muse opines that they could read scripture together and deduce polar opposite meanings. Yet, the anecdote of contradiction is wrapped in a reflective, three-and-a-half minute ode to the seminal role that Seth Muse played in shaping his younger brother. It represents

the correlation between Taylor Muse’s two biggest inspirations. As someone who shyly admits to pondering religion far more than he publicly lets on, the Quiet Company singer seems cautiously aware never to let his beliefs become alienating.

And with the arrival of Harper – to a formerly Christian father and a Jewish mother – the link between family and spiritually no longer is just a thing of his personal past. It’s a part of his family’s future.

“Harper has kind of brought religion back to the front. It’s a conversation I’ve been putting off for a while. I have to admit to [my parents] that I’m not really in the club any more,” Muse said of telling his family that his daughter won’t be raised with any church affiliation. “It’s going to bring about a confrontation that I’ve been dreading for years. The thing that worries me most is breaking my father’s heart. But I have my own family, and I have to make the same choice for her that my parents made for their kids. At some point, you have to just do what feels right and not worry about your parents’ approval.”

His voice trails off when discussing the inevitable conversation. It’s a talk that he danced around while leading up to his wedding 2006, when he and Leah held a secular ceremony. But this will be different. This could mean that the next generation of Muses has one less person whose decisions are based entirely on faith.

For Taylor Muse, it just means that his daughter will be free to make her own choices, much like he did when he opted to break from the church, or on that day in April when he settled on Electric Light Orchestra’s “Mr. Blue Sky” instead of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9.

“Taylor is the sweetest guy,” Lino said. “He’s just a gentle, caring guy. You can tell by the way he treats people around him. He looks out for others.”

Because of that undeniable part of Muse’s demeanor, the title of *Everyone You Love Will Be Happy Soon* takes on greater significance. Instead of sounding like mere wishful reassurance, it’s as though the phrase comes with the singer’s personal guarantee. Not only will they be happy soon, he’ll make damn sure of it.

“When I started out writing the new record, I was thinking a lot about death. But when I would write, all the songs became about making my wife smile,” Muse said. “It pretty much is a record to make her happy, to cheer her up.”

And it’s a record that tries to do so by reveling in his mortality, drawing strength from his confessions of vulnerability. *Everyone You Love Will Be Happy Soon* might never answer all its own questions, but just asking could be what it takes for Muse to bring the people he loves most a little slice of blue sky.

That, and a pair of strategically placed headphones on his wife’s stomach.





Grizzly Bear

Reflections On Sound

words by Ryan Ffrench photos by Randy Cremean

When asked to explain the theory of beauty expressed within his paintings, Pablo Picasso famously retorted: “I have a horror of people who speak about the beautiful. What is the beautiful? One must speak of problems in painting!” Conceptual abstractions and big ideas were of no interest to the godfather of modern art. Those who sought to explain his pictures were, in his own words, “as a rule, completely mistaken.”

Central to Picasso’s view of painting – and that of the avant-garde in general – is the understanding that form and content are fundamentally inseparable parts of one aesthetic whole. Shapes, lines, and colors become agents not only of design, but also of emotional and existential communication. In a Picasso painting, subject matter and meaning are completely dissolved into style so that the viewer approaches the absolute only through details. This is, of course, what makes Picasso’s art so “difficult” – but it also is what makes it so universal and rewarding.

The same is true of Grizzly Bear. Like Picasso, they seek artistic expression primarily in the formal elements of their craftsmanship – and, like Picasso, their audience is challenged to look beyond facile conceptualization and the search for “meaning” to discover an authentic response in the finer details: spaces, textures, notes left behind. This is the kind of band who prefer to talk about the way their music sounds rather than what they intend it to do or be about. They prefer to talk about the way different reflective surfaces affect their harmonies than the way these harmonies affect their audience. Our conversation, then, came to focus not on the cerebral problems of beauty and art, but on the technical and creative problems of music itself.

Singers Ed Droste and Dan Rossen emphasize that their songs begin with a roughly hewn structural blueprint and then resolve themselves as the band comes together and concentrates on sculpting details of acoustics and atmosphere. Grizzly Bear write their songs the way a builder constructs a house: slowly, precisely, piece by piece – focusing more on the process than any idea or theoretical abstraction. In fact, their songs are, in many ways, less



“We like to feel that we are in a good environment. Having big spaces – having great spaces – that was a huge part of what we wanted to do with this album.”

- Ed Droste



musical compositions than architectural constructs – less something to listen to than something to live in, to experience by immersion. Just as an architect designs a house to create aesthetic unity rather than to induce some specific reaction from its inhabitants, Grizzly Bear aim only to create something whole, something valid on its own terms without the response written in.

In this sense, an interesting parallel emerges between Grizzly Bear's albums and the physical spaces in which they are conceived. *Yellow House* (2006), the band's astonishing breakthrough LP, creates a space of hushed intimacy that captures the inviting warmth of the yellow country house where the majority of recording took place. These atmospheric details become the basic content of the music; they turn form into visceral experience. For Grizzly Bear, as with Picasso, this is the basic challenge of the creative process. And it is a challenge that they have confronted and transformed into *Veckatimest*, one of the year's (and perhaps the decade's) most anticipated albums.

Grizzly Bear recorded *Veckatimest* in a churchlike building nestled away in New York's Catskill Mountains, an open space that allowed them to translate their fragile bedroom folk into a widescreen psychedelic aesthetic. Primary songwriter Droste confirmed that much of *Veckatimest*'s grander sonic scale comes from the acoustic qualities of the studio.

"We like to feel that we are in a good environment," Droste said. "Having big spaces – having great spaces – that was a huge part of what we wanted to do with this album."

Percussionist Chris Bear elaborated: "We recorded in essentially a cathedral-sized room, part of an old estate. We were able to play loud and play together, which we haven't really been able to do in the past before, and I think this helped us let loose as a band and develop songs in this particular way."

And if the larger and louder recording space facilitated an emboldened muscularity behind the new songs, it certainly was not at the expense of acoustic nuances.

"There are all these different layers of depth in the reverb," explained bassist/clarinetist/producer Chris Taylor. "You can explore tight, closed sounds and huge, open sounds almost at once."

The result is a fuller interpretation of the band's pastoral atmospherics that feels expansive even when the songs fall into total silence. *Veckatimest* is an album of vast, ethereal landscapes that are as subtle as they are viscer-



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"There was a lot more texture and more of the eerie intimate atmosphere. When you are changing locations you can dig in again and start recording and be excited about it because of the different vibe. You pack up everything and break it all out again. It feels different, and it helps."

- Chris Taylor

ally engaging. It relishes in the complexity of its arrangements but – thanks in large part to Taylor's production – feels whole and aesthetically irreducible.

Taylor is an old-school audiophile – a DIY-minded control freak whose attention to detail is responsible for Grizzly Bear's immaculate production and, in turn, much of the band's distinctive sound. For him, the new recording space always meant that *Veckatimest* would adopt its own idiosyncratic voicing.

"There are amazingly different reflective surface in there," he mused. "Changing that acoustic response on the record gave these songs their unique space."

There has been some speculation in the past as to whether Grizzly Bear would move into a studio and hand things over to a professional producer to ensure that *Veckatimest* was a critical and commercial step forward after the success of *Yellow House*, but after just five minutes with them, it became clear that this is band who could never relinquish the artistic control of their sound.

Taylor's delicate and delicately arranged intricacies of texture wash the album with an analog sensibility that perfectly compliments Grizzly Bear's somewhat bucolic appeal. To fully realize the quiet intimacy of new tracks such as "All We Ask", "Dory" and "Foreground", he revealed that the band decided to find another, more suitable, recording space rather than falling back upon digital post-production. They moved to a little house in Cape Cod that was "smaller and cozy and had a fire going all the time," Droste said. "There was a lot more texture and more of the eerie intimate atmosphere."

Taylor continued: "When you are changing locations, you can dig in again and start recording and be excited about it because of the different vibe. You pack up everything and break it all out again. It feels different, and it helps."

In the mania of today's "digitize-everything" sensibility, there is something almost disarmingly refreshing about this approach. I mean, there's probably a "fireside intimacy" filter in Pro Tools, right? Maybe, but Taylor seems not to care.

"We tried to let the songs breathe," he said. "We went away and then came back into a new location with a fresh perspective and continued recording to explore the natural reverb."

There is not a hint of pretension in Grizzly Bear's affinity for analog manipulation: They are deeply invested in sculpting the minutiae of their sound, and so prefer to do

it the old-fashioned way – to take matters into their own hands. Again, it is the form that takes creative precedence. So yes, Grizzly Bear could move to a major studio and accept the instant production sheen – but, don’t forget, Picasso could have established an Andy Warhol-style factory system, and someone like filmmaker Stan Brakhage could have made the switch to digital ... Artists for whom form itself is the thing of all creative expression never will relinquish control of their aesthetic process.

This means good things for Grizzly Bear’s audience. Their albums are built upon a sonic meticulousness that profoundly rewards conscientious and deliberate interaction. Listening to *Veckatimest* on headphones is like seeing a Picasso portrait in person, as opposed to hanging the print on your wall: Up close, the arrangements unfold in a way that only elaborate upon their mysterious appeal. This is music that is constructed slowly, artfully, with a focus on details – and so deserves to be approached in the same way.

In the context of our world of streaming singles and bi-hourly blog posts, *Veckatimest* is an album that profoundly challenges the way we have learned to consume music. You can’t stream one track and then move on to the next computer-generated taste suggestion, nor can you listen to the singles without taking them in the context of the album’s track listing. This is not, as Droste feels much of contemporary indie rock has come to be viewed, “a product passing – a thing to listen to and forget about.”

So delete that 128kbps leak from your iTunes, buy the album May 26, and listen to it with the quality and precision that the band intends it to be heard. I swear, I’m not on Warp Records’ payroll – but judging an album such as this from a shitty rip is like watching the new Terrence Malick film on YouTube or reading the SparkNotes to *Ulysses*. Don’t do it.

Instead, stop everything for a moment and genuinely experience the spaces that Grizzly Bear have constructed. Do not expect instant gratification. (This is not pre-digested or romanticized kitsch; the music here is the “cause” from which the audience can produce “effect.”) Do not listen for meaning or some cerebral conceptualization of beauty. (Picasso would be horrified: Grizzly Bear take care not to tell you how to react to their music; these songs reveal themselves to intuitive, almost bodily interaction.) And don’t blog about *Veckatimest* upon first run through. (Just don’t.) Listen for the formal details – those intricate subtleties of sound – and let them hold you, oblivious to your surroundings, in their own aestheticized version of reality. For in these particulars, you might just discover that convulsive, transcendent sensation of the absolute.



“I think it all eventually ended up getting to this place in the recording process where everyone had an opinion in some way about this part or that. This totally influenced the way the songs came out-- despite some songs coming from a place inside of one person.”

- Daniel Rossen



Navigating Blind Pilot

words by Elliot Cole
photos by Randy Cremean



On Blind Pilot's website, postcards from various locales are littered throughout the page, scanned with handwritten messages from the band's current tour. Elvis croons amidst a backdrop of palm trees from Memphis on one postcard, while lush pine trees dart into a pink Idaho sky on another. The message, be it intentional or not, is important: for Oregon-based Blind Pilot, the destination isn't nearly as important as the journey. And the journey – including tours on bicycles, sidewalk shows, and unplanned performances – ultimately defines the destination.

Frontman Israel Nebeker, drummer Ryan Dobrowski, and the friends that make up Blind Pilot roll into Austin in their 15-seat van, prepped to play six shows at the city's annual South by Southwest music conference. While bands confusedly attempt to angle their vans into narrow, crowded alleys and load-in spots, you can't help but wonder if it's all a bit overwhelming for Blind Pilot. After all, the group's current tour marks the first time that they have ever used a van. Instead, Nebeker and Dobrowski had previously chewed up upwards of 60 miles a day on bikes over the course of two West Coast tours. "It's basically like Canada border to Mexico border," the soft-spoken Nebeker says, mapping out the band's 2,000-mile route.

It seems bizarre that Nebeker and Dobrowski talk about the bike tours with such straight faces, as if it were an everyday occurrence. It's as if they fail to realize that a small group of cyclists with instrument-laden trailers rolling behind them is at all abnormal. But the more they discuss their priorities and the more they discuss why they make music, the more it seems like a natural step for the duo.

After meeting at the University of Oregon, Nebeker and Dobrowski branched off from another band and started penning songs together. "That summer, the two of us went to England, and we just played on the streets a whole bunch," explains Dobrowski. He smiles when he talks, and speaks in hyper sentences that he often has to restart. "That was a pretty big musical moment for the both of us. It really just came together. We had jobs running a summer camp over there and in the evenings we would go into town and play music on the streets. Something connected between the two of us playing that was just solid. So...we decided to start Blind Pilot."

That street performer aesthetic is the most important underlying trait of Blind Pilot. The band's sound enterprises the same sentiment: lo-fi pop songs teeming with accessible and poignant folk nuances. It's a sound written on a back porch with friends, not a sound crafted in a studio or compiled on a laptop. Something about it is purely *organic*, as if it weren't meant to be recorded, but merely strummed around a backyard fire pit.

After their initial bike tour spanning from Vancouver to San Francisco, Nebeker relocated to Hawaii for what was originally thought to be a brief time. "I told Ryan I was going there for three months at the max...after like eight or nine months he was like, 'Buddy, we gotta go on an-

other bike tour. If you're not coming back, I'm going by myself.'"

Nebeker agreed, but suggested the band put an album together before heading out. The initial idea was to keep it simple, doing brief recordings of drums, guitars, and vocals with producer Skyler Norwood in Portland. But after the recordings started coming together, the band began to realize the possibilities of what would become *3 Rounds and A Sound*, an album that would perfectly encapsulate Blind Pilot's interpersonal touch.

"We had to make that decision," says Nebeker, matter-of-factly. "Are we going to go on the bikes right now? Or are we gonna stay and make this album what we want it to sound like? So we chose to do that."

Eventually, the group embarked on their second bike tour, but the seeds of the album had just barely been planted. iTunes soon featured a track as the "Song of the Week", and attention from NPR and print magazines came soon thereafter. The sparkling pop/folk gems - soaked in Nebeker's sensitive and velvety singing - were starting to make their mark. When the band returned from their jaunt, requests started coming in for Blind Pilot to play all over the states. "It would probably take three years to do it by bike, so instead we did it by van," smiles Nebeker.

The van does offer some logistical benefits: the group is able to fit in the xylophone, standing bass, and full drum kit that help Blind Pilot's sound blossom. (On prior tours, Dobrowski used a miniature drum set and Nebeker used a smaller vibraphone that they tucked away in small, occasionally coffin-shaped trailers.) It also provides significant compromises, and Nebeker admits that they would rather be driving a biodiesel or veggie oil conversion bus had this tour not sprung up so quickly. "Our schedule is so full right now that I'm sort of thankful that we don't have to go from Chinese food restaurant to Chinese food restaurant begging for leftover oil," Dobrowski adds, laughing.

Still, the opportunity to reach people is the unflappable essence of the band. On their bike tours, Nebeker admits, "We booked some shows in the major cities, but in all the smaller towns we didn't even know who to call or where to ask around...to book a show. We just rolled into town a lot of times and it was just like, 'Hey, nice to meet you.' And people would be like, 'What are you guys doing. Why are you carrying a coffin?'"

This time around, the band doesn't have to convince bar and venue owners to let them perform. At SXSW, the band is just figuring out how to play all the showcases asked of them. Either way, connecting with people remains the root of Blind Pilot, just as it served as the ethos of the band when it was formed. "It was, in a way, wanting to get back to that which was probably one of the most pure musical moments, where we weren't trying for anything," states Dobrowski about the band's beginnings. "We just liked playing together, liked interacting with people." Whether they'll soon meet their goals is arguable, but that's hardly the point; instead, it's how they get there.

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