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CMJ: Flashback to the 1960s

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Two of the busier multiply booked bands at CMJ are Crystal Stilts and Crystal Antlers, names that are easy to confuse for those who've never heard either one. Here's the cheat sheet:

Crystal Antlers performed a daytime show at Piano's on Thursday. (Nicholas Roberts for The New York Times) They're from opposite ends of the United States: Crystal Stilts are from Brooklyn, while Crystal Antlers are from Long Beach, Calif. But the real difference is a few years—specifically, a few years in the mid-1960s.

Crystal Stilts live circa 1965-66, when garage-rock was dabbling in psychedelia; I'd guess every band member has a copy of the "Nuggets" anthology, probably on vinyl. Crystal Stilts's songs run on terse, repetitive riffs under nasally chanted vocals, buzzing, droning electric guitars and the inflexible analog tones of an old electric organ; the drummer plays standing up (so tom-tom replaces kick drum) and rarely varies the beat during a song. Each song is a brief, uninflected slice of its chosen era.

Crystal Antlers move the clock forward to somewhere around late 1968, when song forms had opened up to wander the psychedelic wilderness. Crystal Antlers's songs might first waft into earshot with some echoey noodling, then heave into motion, seesawing between rocker and waltz. Electric organ and guitars that are woozy with vibrato and wah-wah wander side by side, sometimes intersecting and sometimes colliding; there's a lot of tambourine-shaking and the vocals are mostly howled: "Why do we have to die?" Sounds like the late-1960s never did.

Meanwhile, of course, there was also Crystal Castles, generating its electropop from the 8-bit sounds found in old hand-held video games. Fast-forward to the 1990s.