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Laid back works for pinback

Indie-rock underground stalwarts please fans with fluid rhythms and subtly complex arrangements

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'I consume the rage of the fire / And I can feel the depths of the ocean / I've become consumed by desire / And I can feel the depths of the ocean,' guitarist-vocalist Rob Crow sings on "Subbing for Eden" midway through "Autumn of the Seraphs," the fourth album from the San Diego-based duo Pinback, and its first release for Chicago's Touch and Go Records.

It's a bit hard to accept the first line in each of those couplets -- there's very little evidence of consuming desire in the group's music, much less unbridled rage. But the watery images evoked by the rest of that verse are entirely appropriate: Since Crow formed the band in 1998 with bassist-vocalist Armistead Burwell "Zach" Smith, Pinback has built a devoted following in the indie-rock underground on the strength of its overlapping melodies, fluid rhythms and subtly complex arrangements.

The depth of the pair's songs partly explains why it has taken so long between albums -- it's been three years since the much-acclaimed "Summer in Abaddon," which reached the group's largest audience yet -- though there are also the facts that Crow is kept busy with a series of side projects (including the metal spoof Goblin Cock and the keyboard-driven experiment Optiganally Yours) and that Pinback simply prefers to let its music evolve at its own pace, in front of the computer in its home studio.

"We often get described as a 'bedroom band' or a 'home-recording project,' but that's kind of off the mark, if you ask me," Smith says. "What it really is is two guys who have done this together for years, where we've played in bands and went to studios and recorded 10 songs at once over three weeks or a month, and the way we work now is really more of an extension of the do-it-yourself attitude. We were interested in recording ourselves even if it was just two guys in a bedroom who didn't know what they were doing, but thought it was amazing that they could do it anyway."

Nevertheless, there's an insular quality to Pinback that is one of its strengths, and Smith says that he and his partner worked hard to block out the expectations created by the success of their last album. "We just try not to think about that ... When you realize, 'Oh, gee, somebody likes that,' it plays with your mind a little bit. But ultimately, I think we just wrangle it down and do what we like to do. You can't ignore that people like what you do and are looking forward to hearing something again from you. But if we're not going to like it, we're not going to do it, whereas if other people aren't going to like, we're still going to do it.

"For me, the album always kind of gets formed as it's going along -- I try not to have too many goals or expectations or guidelines going in. If there was any guideline for this one, I think it was that we were interested in using live drums this time around. We've done the whole programmed drum thing a lot, but we play with live drums, and our past bands all had them, so we were sort of like, 'Let's do it that way this time.' But other than that, it was just like, 'Let's get together and write something and see what happens.' "

Given this laidback approach, how does the duo know when it's written a song that's a keeper along the lines of entrancing new tracks such as "From Nothing to Nowhere" and "How We Breathe"? "I would just say the way it flows -- the way you're not fighting it. It just naturally puts itself together and lays itself out. You're not struggling to make a song, you're not forcing something and it hits that spot where you're like, 'This takes me to a different place.' It piques your interest, and you just want to keep going with it and finish it."

The core members of Pinback (who are augmented onstage by drummer Chris Prescott and multi-instrumentalists Terrin Durfey and Eric Hoversten) have been mainstays in the indie-rock scene since the early '90s, Crow in the bands Thingy and Heavy Vegetables, and Smith with Three Mile Pilot. They brought a wealth of experience to the project when they joined forces, taking the name Pinback from a character in the John Carpenter film "Dark Star" (the influence of science fiction and fantasy geekdom looms over all of their work) and recording for several respected indies before finding their ideal home with Touch and Go. "It's been amazing: We've never been on a label where we're dealing with people who are real people and who actually, truly care about the music we're creating," Smith says.

It's a strong partnership, and one that's almost as inspired as the link between Pinback's leaders. Whether a song comes together with both men in the studio, or it originates with one or the other, Smith says that in the end, each musician puts his mark on it, and the whole is always greater than the individual parts. "It's definitely the two of us feeding off of each other."

And how does he describe each member's strengths? "I would say that for Rob, it's the way he does his melodies and how he approaches vocals. Second, I would say his guitar, and how it intertwines with how I play bass. I think he understands that I just play too many notes, and he knows how to lay off. My biggest thing is I like writing the whole structure of the song -- the chords and the piano parts and all that kind of thing, and he's just like the icing on the cake, adding the final top that turns it into a different thing."

Clearly, it's a recipe that works.

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