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MUSIC REVIEW | PINBACK

Lyrics of Bruised Emotion, Sounds of Gentle Friction

By NATE CHINEN

Zach Smith and Rob Crow, founding partners of the San Diego indie-pop band Pinback, take a low-key but serious approach to their craft. At the Nokia Theater on Tuesday night, flanked by three sidemen, they unpacked their songs in no-nonsense fashion. The bruised emotionalism of their lyrics — “You taste my tears/And we share our souls,” went one refrain in the opener, “Bouquet” — took a back seat to the layered intricacies of the music.

And there were plenty of those, as Pinback’s fans have come to expect. Over the past decade or so, the band has assembled a strong sound out of gentle frictions: some implied chordal dissonance here, a strange modulation there. This is as true on “Autumn of the Seraphs” (Touch and Go), the band’s solid fourth album, as it was from the start.

Even the tag team of Mr. Smith and Mr. Crow can suggest a shifting balance: their voices often converge, splinter and recombine, all within the compact dimensions of a tune.

Mr. Smith plays the complex bass lines that give the band its foundation, much of its propulsion and a lot of its character. He began “Walters,” one of the better new songs, with a strikingly guitarlike arpeggio; elsewhere he strummed dark-hued chords or plucked elaborate patterns. His singing showed signs of strain during the show, but his playing was wickedly self-assured.

Mr. Crow came across as less of a virtuoso but just as crucial a factor in the music. His guitar work was sparse and resourceful. Withholding seems to be his chief strategy as a musician, and even as a frontman: “We’re not playing ‘Penelope’ this tour,” he said after that crowd-pleaser had been requested several times. Then, with a devious grin, he obliged. (Deviousness, by the way, also suits Mr. Crow, who spends his spare time performing as Lord Phallus in a prank-metal band.)

The strength of the rapport between Pinback’s chief members has one unfortunate side effect: it makes everyone else onstage seem extraneous. The exception was Chris Prescott, one of two drummers to appear on “Autumn of the Seraphs.” Had Pinback performed merely as a trio, it would have sacrificed some extra keyboard and guitar filigree, but the music might have felt more concentrated, more productively austere.

That would have suited a band that manages to sound calm and measured even on an overwrought chorus like this one:

And I consume the raging fire

And I can feel the depths of the ocean

And I become consumed by desire

And I swear I thought of you

With the last line of that series, the song pulls back from the grandiose to the mundane. That's a movement Pinback has honed with practice, and it works unusually well.

Pinback performs tonight at the Opera House in Toronto; tomorrow at the Crofoot in Pontiac, Mich.; and Sunday at the Metro in Chicago.

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