



## The odd couple

Pinback preps new album and tour with a free show

by AnnaMaria Stephens

If opposites attract, Pinback's in good shape. The capos of the popular local band, Rob Crow and Zach "Abslv" Smith, are like a musical Penn and Teller. Singer-guitarist Crow is the assertive one, opinionated and a little intimidating until some wry comment tumbles unexpectedly out of his mouth. Smith, the bassist, is shy and polite and content to stay out of the spotlight.

Yet in spite of this, or possibly because of it, the two have forged a crackling chemistry. Since they teamed up a decade ago as a side project—Crow taking a break from his bands Thingy and Heavy Vegetable and Smith from Three Mile Pilot—Pinback has built moderate college-radio success into a very comfortable living.

On Sept. 11, Pinback will release their fourth full-length, *Autumn of the Seraphs*, a follow-up 2004's *Summer In Abaddon*, an album that garnered widespread attention with the single "Fortress." Until then, fans will have to make due with a free "4 O'Clock Fridays" concert this week at the Del Mar Racetrack, where the full band will perform seven of the 11 songs from *Seraphs*.

"It's our strongest album yet," claims Crow, sprawled on the floor of Smith's home studio after a long day at Comic-Con.

Smith, sitting on the couch, mulls over his opinion before speaking. "I feel like we're finally hitting our stride with Pinback," he says.

"As long as we have time to do other things—other bands," he continues, "if you do that, you're not constantly torturing yourself. It doesn't get moldy."

During their 10 years together, Crow and Smith have matured considerably. Each has gotten married, and Crow and his wife have a toddler son. They've also seen a rotating cast of supporting players and experienced a fair amount of band drama.

"The innocence is gone, but we know how to play together. We know how to write a song together well," Smith says. "Still, every once in a while we'll stumble upon something new, and that keeps pushing us forward."

A bit of tension, though, comes with a partnership founded upon mismatched personalities. Crow and Smith have very different approaches to writing music.

Smith, for example, rolls his eyes with hyperbolic exasperation and groans: "I hate lyrics," he says. Softening his stance slightly, he adds, "There are some people who pore over the lyrics of every song. For me, it's all in the melody. Melody gives me the imagery, the feeling. If a word matches up to a note, I'll use it."

To emphasize his point, Smith mentions a friend who sang many Pinback lyrics incorrectly but with great passion. "He didn't care what we were singing, but he was following along the song's melody."

For Crow, the band's primary lyricist, words are often his jumping-off point.

"We use our lyrics to confuse people into submission," he jokes. "There's a total difference between how lyrics are looked at—sometimes they match up to what we're saying; sometimes they don't."

Smith says he's a control freak in the studio while Crow says he likes to do things right but also wants everyone to have a good time.

But when it comes to putting together an album, it's the songs on which Crow and Smith reach an unequivocal consensus that make the final cut. They record and mix everything themselves, which gives them the freedom to experiment now and edit down later.

They've toyed with the idea of hiring a producer but feel that doing so would destroy whatever intangible chemistry makes them so very Pinback.

Plus, at the end of the day, says Crow, not unlike one half of a true couple, "We like the idea of not having anybody to blame for our mistakes but ourselves."

*Pinback plays in the Plaza del Mexico at the Del Mar Fairgrounds on Friday, Aug. 10. Show starts after the races (around 8 p.m.). Free with admission to the races (\$6). 858-755-1141.*

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