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SOUNDCHECK

connecting the artist and the audience

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ume

ISSUE 22

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photo by Randy Cremean

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SOUNDCHECK
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At Soundcheck, we connect the artist to the audience. Over the last four years, we've had the honor of interviewing and photographing many of our favorite bands. Check out our interview archive to get inside the heads of bands like Beirut, MGMT, Vampire Weekend, Grizzly Bear, My Morning Jacket, Justice, Octopus Project, Why?, Dan Deacon, Fanfarlo, Man Man, Sondre Lerche, Justice, Ra Ra Riot, Blind Pilot, DeVotchKa, Los Campesinos!, Annuals, Fujiya & Miyagi, Tilly and the Wall, Yeasayer, The Cribs, The Faint, No Age, The Ruby Suns, Colour Revolt, Flogging Molly, Islands, Cloud Cult, Frightened Rabbit, The Raveonettes, Clinic, British Sea Power, Cut Copy, The Sword, Liars, Les Savy Fav, Architecture In Helsinki, Portugal. The Man, Dirty Projectors, Au Revoir Simone, TV on the Radio, Fleet Foxes, Glasvegas, Girl Talk, The Walkmen, Margot & The Nuclear So & So's, The Veils, Smoking Popes, Ben Kweller, Noah & The Whale and many more!

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Wednesday, Oct. 14, 2009

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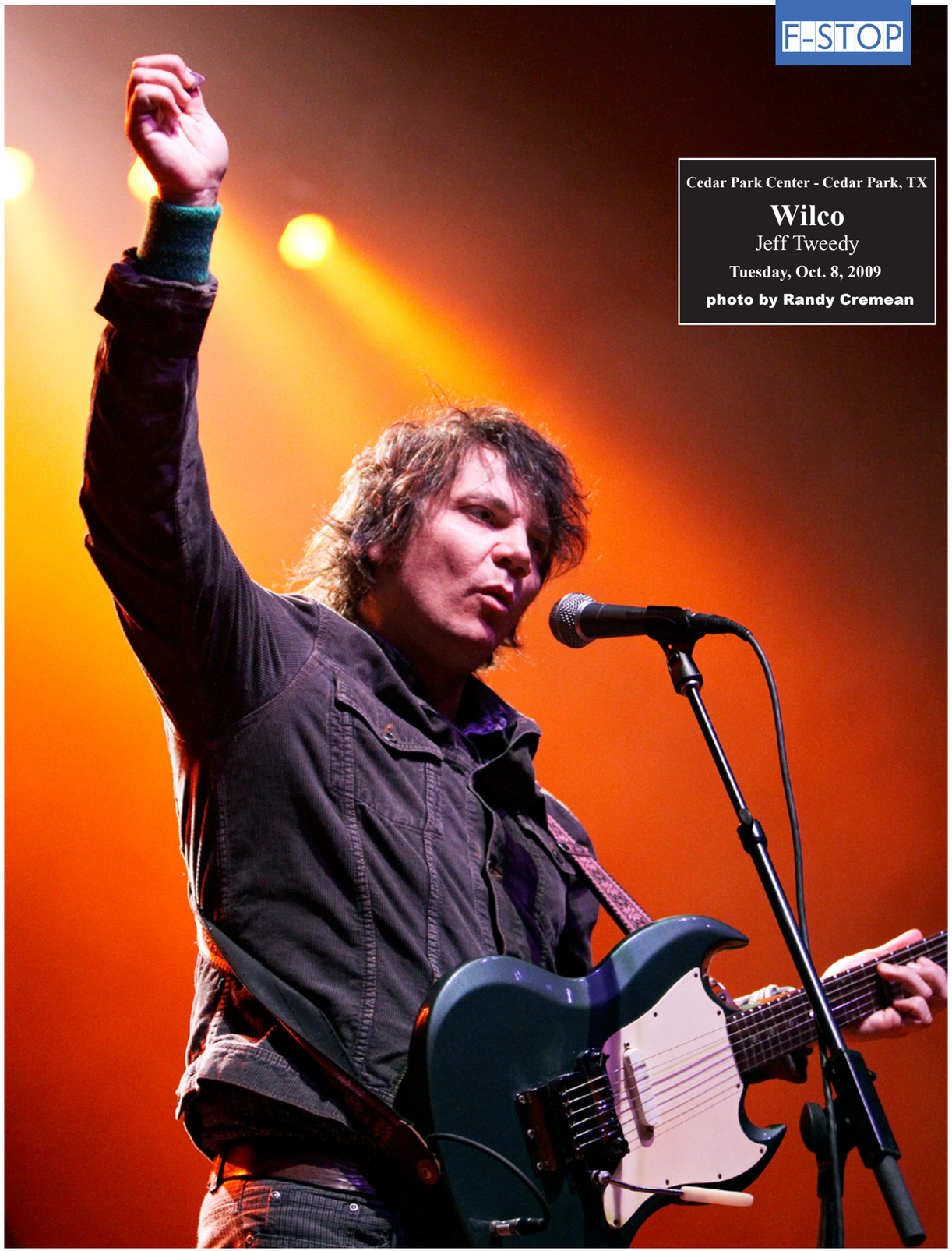

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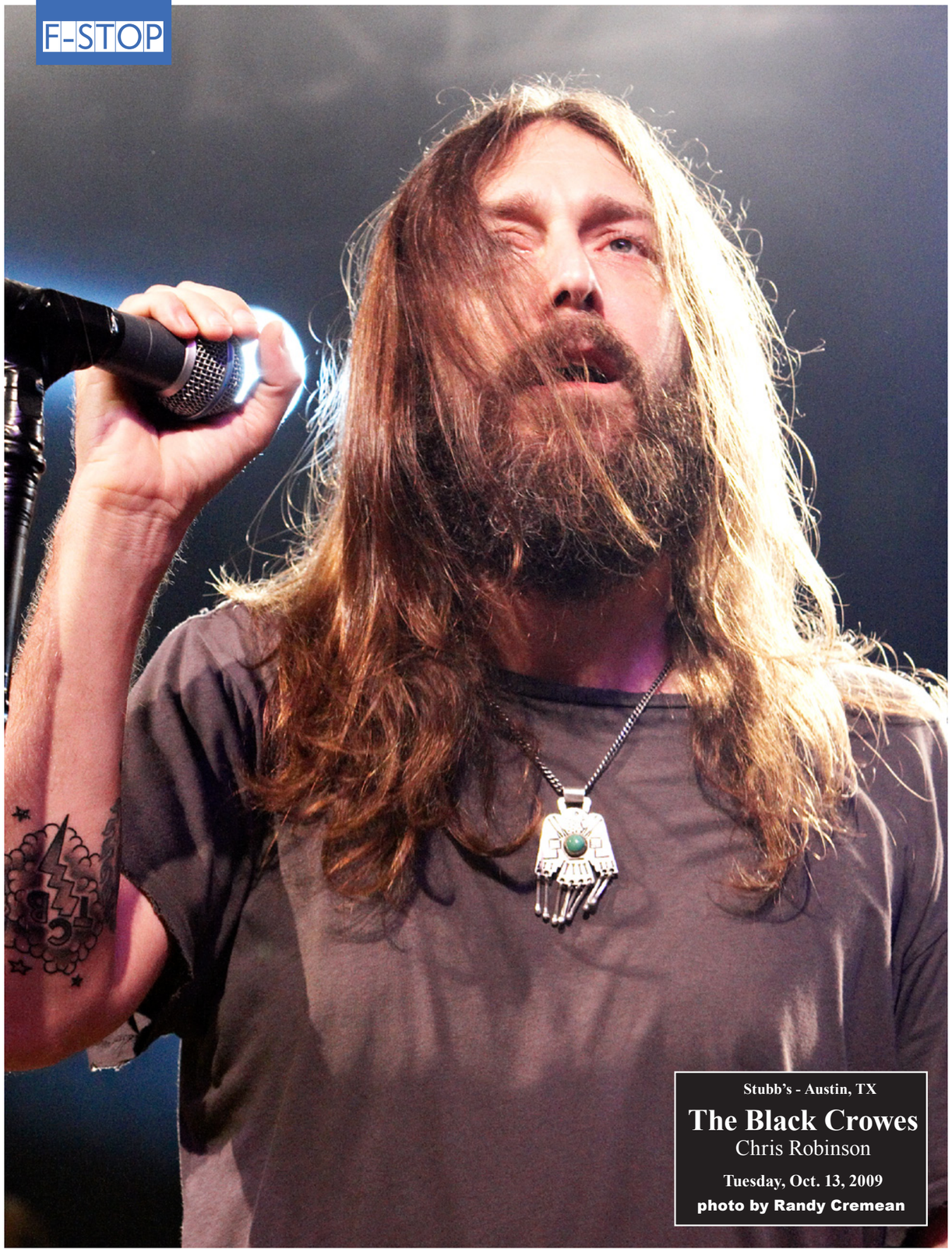

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ACL Fest 2009

Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Karen O

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The Dead Weather

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photo by Randy Cremean

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MUTE MATH

Father Knows Best

words by Derek Wright
photos by Randy Cremean

For a moment, Paul Meany is speechless. The Mutemath frontman had been talking at a steady clip since hopping on the phone one afternoon in early September. But now, almost a half-hour into the conversation, the verbose singer is at a loss for words.

It was a simple inquiry: What's in store for him, personally, aside from the band?

Yet, it was a question that caught the 33-year-old off guard. After all, this was a man whose latest album, *Armistice*, had been released for less than a month. Between the news media blitz for that sophomore LP and rehearsing in the band's Nashville, Tenn., space for a first leg of the subsequent tour, Meany hasn't thought much about life outside of his quartet.

"I'd like to have a baby, to start a family," he said after collecting his thoughts. "I've been married for 11 years, and it's something I think about a lot. One member of our band just became a father. … I think this record would have been a heck of a lot easier if we all were. With kids, we wouldn't have been able to be around each other all the time."

That's right, the Grammy Award-nominated songwriter, who spent the better part of the past three years on the road and is gearing up to do so again, who already splits his time between Tennessee and Louisiana, and who fronts a relatively new ensemble amid the death rattle of record industry stability, thinks that fatherhood would have made the *Armistice* sessions easier.

They were that difficult.

"I've often said, 'Making this record was the hardest music experience of my life,' " said Meany. "It's something that I couldn't do again. I wouldn't want to do it again."

If he were to try and remake the album, it would be Mutemath's third attempt at its 2009 release, the one that all but broke up the group. After the success of 2006's self-titled debut, which garnered a Grammy nod for Best Short Form Music Video for "Typical", the band retreated to its studio to make its follow-up. Yet 16 songs into those sessions – and without any standout tracks – the infighting reached its most heated.

Although there never was a "fuck you" moment – the band didn't officially call it quits – drummer Darren King suggested doing so during one particularly exhausting exchange on the group's front porch. A breakup was something the four members each had considered, but this was the first time any had expressed it to the whole.

"It's so strange that you can spend every minute for a few years with these other people, and have completely different ideas on where the band should go," Meany said. "You'd think that spending all that time together would mean you'd have similar ideas because you all had the same experiences. But that wasn't the case. Somehow, we all wanted the band to go in different ways."

The direction on which the foursome settled meant relinquishing control of the album and soliciting an outside producer. One by one, the band flew in candidates to hear their ideas, find out how they might help the disintegrating friendships, and listen to sug-

"I've often said, 'Making this record was the hardest music experience of my life.' It's something that I couldn't do again. I wouldn't want to do it again."

gestions of how those 16 songs could be salvaged.

But Dennis Herring didn't think the tracks were worth saving. If an adequate sophomore was going to happen, the producer behind albums from The Hives, Ben Folds and Modest Mouse was explicit in what he thought Meany and his band mates needed to do.

They needed to start over. And to finish – or rather, restart – *Armistice*, Mutemath would need to relocate to Herring's Mississippi studio and write the album over.

"He basically told us that we had to stop worrying about recording our album and worry about writing it," Meany said. "He put the focus on songwriting, and making the album would just happen as a result."

It was Herring's brash, direct demeanor and confidence in his criticism that ultimately would spark Mutemath's singular creativity and lead to the completion of the embattled LP.

"We had been plagued by the past," Meany said. "We were so invested in those first batch[es] of music, that once we let go of them, songs just started popping out of thin air."

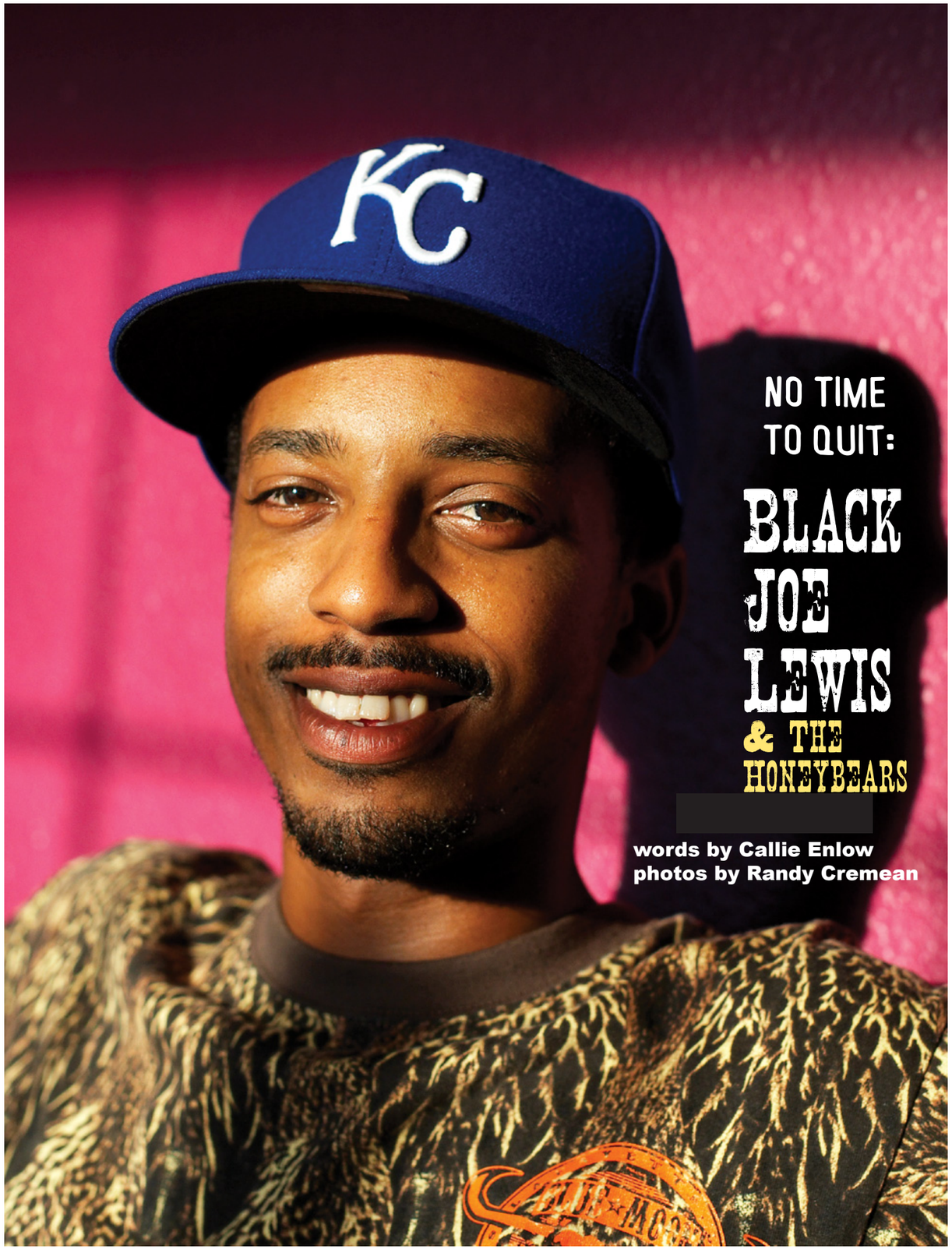
What came about were a dozen of the quartet's strongest tracks. *Armistice* is a calculated, driving album of swirling percussion under Meany's smooth, R&B-style vocals. It's a record laced with Herring's influence. Opener "The Nerve" questions, "*Can you believe this world's got the nerve to insist it won't trade for a better one? / Can you believe this world's yelling out in the dark it wants to be left alone?*" You can almost imagine the producer asking the same of the band's one-time stubbornness. And much like Meany and his mates decided, the song's solution is to "set it on fire" and start fresh.

"Backfire" is a tale of old habits dying hard, "Spotlight" muses about making decisions under scrutiny, and "Clipping" tells of the singer's helplessness. Titles such as "Pins and Needles", "Burden", "Goodbye", and "Lost Year" hint at Mutemath's tumultuous recording that left the band members at their wits' ends. Despite those tracks' innuendo, "Odds" spells it out more directly, with Meany singing, "*Back and forth the same / Be careful how you frame / Your argument, your argument / We've been given all we can / And it finally show the end / Of our tolerance, our tolerance*".

"It's really humbling – and kind of embarrassing – to say that we had to bring in someone else to help us get along and finish this album. It's like we weren't grown up or professional enough to do it on our own," Meany said. "It's really eye-opening, and we learned a lot of what this band needs to make music. I don't think we'll ever again get into a situation like that. It's funny, but [Herring] had to pull all these little mind tricks to get us to get along so we could finish the album. It's almost like he was our dad."

Hopefully for Meany, he was taking notes – both on how to relate to his mates the next time they hit the recording studio and on the subtleties of fatherhood. Who knows which advice he'll need first.

Darren King



NO TIME TO QUIT: BLACK JOE LEWIS & THE HONEYBEARS

words by Callie Enlow
photos by Randy Cremean

Life is pretty sweet for Austin's Black Joe Lewis & the Honeybears: A top-three position on Billboard's blues albums chart, crossover appeal to the SXSW indie set, positive comparisons to James Brown, sold-out New Year's Eve shows, an upcoming European tour. Yet, not so long ago, bandleader and soul screamer Joe Lewis nearly walked out on music. Just as he made his exit, new band members hooked him back in for the kind of success he always wanted but never quite attained.

Back in early 2006, a skinny, 24-year-old dude strapped on a guitar once a week, walked on stage at a joint called the Hole in the Wall, and screamed, howled and sank to his knees until every eye in Austin's famous college bar turned his way. They did, but not enough to justify a musician's career path to Lewis.

Back then, Lewis didn't always have a reliable car or a place to stay. He spent his days hustling waitstaff jobs or shucking oysters at respectable-yet-dingy Quality Seafood wholesalers. At night, Lewis partied hard, drinking at bars or with his friends in the now-defunct country band The Weary Boys. For a while, he refused to wear anything but sweatpants.

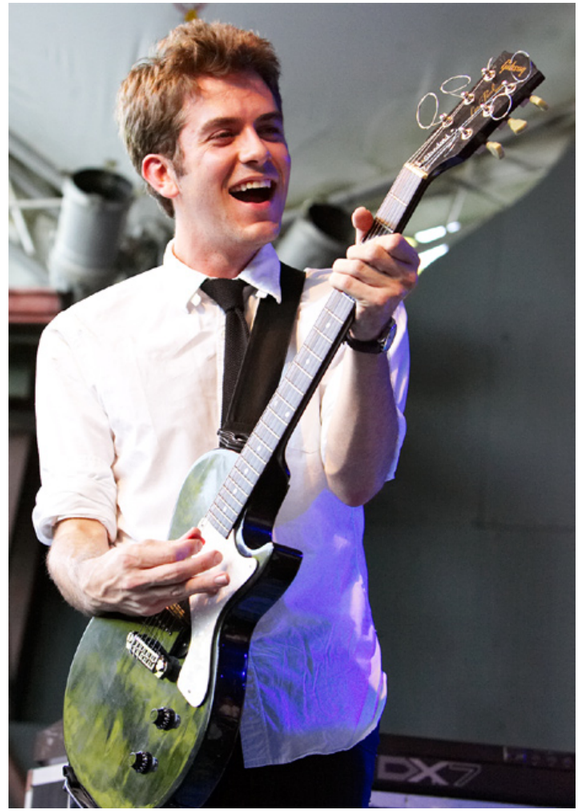
Lewis had enough charm to coast through the car-less days and drunken nights, he even looked OK in sweats. But he worried friends with talk of hanging up his musical act, moving away and finding a "respectable" career.

The infuriating thing about that speech was that, as a musician, Lewis was incredibly intuitive, a standout in a city full of talented performers. He delivered gritty and soulful performances of self-penned songs that sounded more like crackling 1930s records than the polished pizzazz of modern bluesmen. He and his former band, the Cool Breeze, garnered early and effusive praise from the Austin Chronicle's music grande dame Margaret Moser and opened for Kris Kristofferson at the 2006 Austin Music Awards. But Lewis describes his early bandleader experience as mainly frustrating.

"My band sucked," Lewis said. "We didn't practice. So I just played Sunday nights; it got old. Now I play every night of the week."

Lewis' salvation came in the unlikely form of University of Texas student Zach Ernst, who in 2007 booked Black Joe Lewis and his former band to open for Little Richard at the college's 40 Acres Festival.

"Right after the Little Richard thing, right after that, me



Zach Ernst

and Zach started hanging out; we never really stopped. I never got a chance to quit," Lewis said in the Emo's dressing room before a hometown show where he was opening for the New York Dolls.

Ernst became Lewis' second lead guitarist, and a collection of college friends began playing gigs with Lewis and his true blue bandmate Darren Sluyter to form Lewis' current backing band, the Honeybears.

This evening, Lewis and the 'bears find themselves back in Austin, in the green room, playing scales and drinking Lone Star, waiting to open their fourth show for glam rock legends the New York Dolls. The Honeybears – mostly young, white kids – frequently embellish Lewis' quiet, thoughtful and very short answers during our pre-show interview. Lewis seems grateful for their interjections, and the outfit functions more as an organic bunch of funny friends than a group of professional musicians.

Many of them remember seeing Lewis during his Hole in the Wall days.

"I saw him at Headhunters a few times and was like, 'Man, this guy is cool, but … ,' " says Ian Varley, the current band's keyboardist, about Lewis' skills on the guitar, the first and only instrument he picked up at age 20. He looks at Lewis, "At that point, you'd only been playing guitar a couple of years. So you weren't real serious about it."

Sluyter, (pronounced "Slider"), literally Lewis' right-hand man on the green room couch and a former member of The Weary Boys, said, "I had played a lot with Joe before, and he hadn't really found his voice yet. After Hole in the Wall, everything changed." He, too, looks at Lewis and continues, "I think Hole in the Wall was the best thing that ever happened to you."

The second best thing, bassist Bill Stevenson said, was a hazy April evening not long after the 40 Acres Festival.

"We were watching this Muddy Waters thing for his birthday and started passing around this little cigar-box guitar," said Stevenson, who used to stand outside the Guadalupe Street window at Hole in the Wall to watch Lewis play, too young to enter the 21 and up bar. "And then we watched this Stax record review in Europe, me and Joe and Sluyter, we were real stoned and watched it, and I remember thinking intuitively, 'We need to do that.' "

"And that was the one time out of a thousand that one stoned thought led to a good thing," jokes Varley, the animated redheaded elder of the Honeybears.

It makes sense though, listening to the group's debut full-length, Tell 'Em What Your Name Is!. Lewis' voice is unique, raspy like Waters', emotive like Brown's. His

Ian Varley

"You don't want to do anything to half-ass it. [From the beginning,] I was like, ***'If I don't get to be at that point, I don't want to be 40 years old and playing a local bar on Monday night.'*** *You want to try to make success out of it. Do whatever you can, and take it as far as you can."*

- Black Joe Lewis

guitar skills, once muddled, retain Lewis' early power but with finesse influenced by idols such as Lightnin' Hopkins. The horn section, which comprises Sluyter, David McKnight and Eduardo Ramirez, is big and bold in the style of Booker T. and the MGs.

While they proudly cop to these classic soul and blues influences, Lewis and his gang admit a hearty affinity for everything from yacht rock to Buck Owens. The former shows up at sound check, when the group covers Toto's "Rosanna", and even in the keyboard and bongo intro to "I'm Broke" on Tell 'Em. Buck Owens' influence, born from Lewis' time hanging out with The Weary Boys, are all over Lewis' lyrics, which, if made out during his yowling delivery, are covertly funny.

Take, for example, Lewis' controversial "Bitch, I Love You", one of his earliest songs, written by a friend as a joke. One reason the band enjoys touring with the New York Dolls so much is, as Stevenson put it, "I'm not ashamed of doing 'Bitch, I love you' in front of them. You do that in front of a jam band, and there's like, feminist chicks who freak out. Some people don't take that the right way."

Lewis cracks up at this.

When asked whether the song regularly inspires heated reaction, the band collectively nods.

"Al Green fucking canned us; we were close to going on tour with him," Lewis said.

"It's like, c'mon, it's a fucking joke," Stevenson said. "It's funny."

Despite Green's worries, the song didn't stop Lewis from achieving a career-defining moment: opening for Barack Obama at a February 2008 rally in downtown Austin.

"Yeah, but we didn't sing that," Lewis said. "The dude booking the bands told me before, 'I don't want to have to pull the plug on you; this is a family event.' I wasn't going to do it though; I've got good judgment."

Ramirez, whose baritone saxophone nearly rivals him in height, still marveled, "The first thing Obama did was thank us when he got on stage; it was really cool."

By the time of that rally, the band already had experienced an only-in-Austin stroke of luck that helped put them on tastemakers' radars. Just a few months after officially forming, Black Joe Lewis & the Honeybears played a show at hipster haven the Beauty Bar, unknowingly wowing Spoon front man Britt Daniel, who later asked them to open a local show for the band.

"Basically, they were kind of testing the waters," Varley said. "They did this secret show at the Mohawk and they were like, 'We like these guys, but can we play together?' "

The young band were so psyched that they put on one of the most energetic shows they can remember, and Spoon asked Lewis to open the West Coast leg of their tour.

Frantic touring ensued, usually as the opening band for popular Austin acts such as What Made Milwaukee Famous and Okkervil River. The entire band is what Lewis describes as "a riff band." As they bust out covers and new material, Lewis is all teeth, smiling at an Ernst guitar solo or when Stevenson backs him up on vocals. Varley's lumbering frame leaves the keyboards to sing, too, and the horn section dance, stepping back and forth as though they were on "American Bandstand".

Soon, labels lined up to capture the Honeybears' sound on vinyl. Americana heavyweights Lost Highway sealed the deal. The label heavily promoted Lewis and Co.'s EP and recent debut album, a spring stalwart on indie radio and the source of a summer VH1 video for "Sugarfoot". The song was referred to by more than one critic as "the best song James Brown never wrote."

The band is still far from super famous or super rich. Some members still telecommute for various freelance gigs, and Lewis kept his job at Quality Seafood until late last year. He lives in a modest apartment with two roommates in North Austin.

"I don't know, I might be able to afford my own place," Lewis pondered before shaking his head. "I don't want to risk it though."

Someday though, he might not consider it such a risk. Now fully confident in the sound he calls garage soul, he can envision a world tour someday.

"I think the future is whatever we make of it, as long as we keep playing good stuff," he said.

His old friend and trumpet player Sluyter looks up and asks, "If you hadn't met Zach, do you think you would have thrown in the towel?"

"I was leaning on it because there wasn't really much going on," Lewis said. "You don't want to do anything to half-ass it. [From the beginning,] I was like, 'If I don't get to be at that point, I don't want to be 40 years old and playing a local bar on Monday night.' You want to try to make success out of it. Do whatever you can, and take it as far as you can."

The Joys of The Pains of Being Pure at Heart

words by Callie Enlow

photos by Randy Cremean

assisted by Pooneh Ghana

Kip Berman isn't your typical frontman. He's far too self-deprecating, too excitable to exude any type of New York cool. His lanky frame and baby-faced demeanor are more disarming than domineering, and he walks around with an unflappable grin. But Berman has every right to be one of the most elated men in indie pop: The self-proclaimed music nerd's band, The Pains of Being Pure at Heart, is one of the new darlings in the pop realm, using 2009's self-titled full length as a launching point for the New York-based quartet. So forgive him if he can't stop smiling.

"We definitely all were kind of hyperactive music fans growing up," Berman laughed. "I mean, different people define their lives in different ways. Some people have girlfriends; some people are good at sports. Growing up, … we sort of dorked out about records. It never changed as we got older," Berman said.

He and keyboardist Peggy Wang-East have just finished soundchecking at The Mohawk, the Austin venue where they will be meeting bandmates Alex Naidus and Kurt Feldman onstage in a few hours for a packed crowd of pop paradise-seeking fans. He should be comfortable in that environment; after all, he's still one of them.

Berman and Wang-East leave an immediate impression. They are polite but at ease, and, more so than anything, very eager to talk about music. It becomes obvious that Berman isn't offering hyperbole about his music geekdom; he has the air of an independent record storeowner but without the pomposity. In fact, it's difficult to get Berman to focus on his *own* band. He brings up The Exploding Hearts and Yo La Tengo. He lights up when mentioning My Bloody Valentine, The Dirtbombs, or friends Titus Andronicus. He even brings up Blink-182 with the same unwavering admiration he seems to have for all of the artists.

Fittingly, The Pains of Being Pure at Heart was formed on the basis of fanship.

"Peggy was actually in a band already called The Metric Mile," Berman said. "… There was this band that we both really loved called Manhattan Love Suicides, and when they were coming to New York, The Metric Mile was opening for them. … I was pretty jealous of that. So we started a band so that we could open for them, too."

After recruiting friends to form the band, Berman set up the show (a birthday party for Wang-East) and Pains had arrived.

Despite the fact that the majority of the members had never been on tour – "Kurt was the only one who had been in bands that were good before … [or] existed outside the ZIP code in which we lived," Berman laughs – Pains found some solid footing with its hazy, indie pop sound. The group found a nice balance of shoegaze-touched pop, using distorted guitars to buoy infectious melodies. Not surprisingly, it's a sound that is the end result of the group's tastes: fuzz-drenched noisy pop songs that would make Kevin Shields jealous. Appropriately, the band has taken a genre usually reserved for pop fetishists and ridden it to the Billboard charts.

Wang-East is grateful that the band took a couple of years before the buzz really started to build.

"We were able to make mistakes without anyone paying attention," she giggled.

Berman reinforces the notion, explaining that the group feels that it had a gradual ascent to their newfound success rather than being an overnight blog sensation.

"I think it's really fortunate," he said. "I think it would have been really bad if a lot of these things started happening the first year we were around. I don't think we were musically that ready to deal with it."

If there is a reputation that precedes Pains, it's the group's unabashed sincerity. They do seem genuinely appreciative of the chance to tour as musicians, and, although Berman refers to himself as "not the most self-reflective dude," he sheds some insight on why the band is so giddy.

"I thought, before I formed this band, 'I'll move to New York,' " he said. "I'm like 25 or 26 and I was like, 'Oh, I'm just going to … go to work every day for the next 40 years. That's all I'm going to do, and maybe I'll have a week vacation at some point or something, and that's what life was going to be.' "

Berman avoids waxing philosophical, but he has located the band's central driving force. The

“I don’t think there’s room to be [ungrateful]. I think I’d be a dick if I complained … about anything. How can you be bothered by the fact [that you’re a musician]? If you don’t want to do it, don’t do it. … No one is so great that it’s like, you’re doing a favor by making music.”

- Kip Berman

group views Pains as a sort of blessing, a chance to escape the trials and tribulations of real life in exchange for something more redeeming. He wrangles another wide smile before continuing.

“I can’t believe I’ve gotten a reprieve from that at all,” he said, referring back to the New York nine-to-five. “Real life is really hard and sad. Compared to getting to play music, … it’s much better playing music.”

Wang-East has similar notions.

“I never even expected to get to go on tour and get to go to half the places that we’ve been to. I’m just really thankful to have that experience before I’m kind of, like, old and dying,” she said with a laugh.

With this sincerity comes a small degree of confusion. Why aren’t all bands this grateful? How many people get to see the world and write music as a profession?

“I don’t think there’s room to be [ungrateful],” Berman said, his smile temporarily fading. “I think I’d be a dick if I complained … about anything. How can you be bothered by the fact [that you’re a musician]? If you don’t want to do it, don’t do it. … No one is so great that it’s like, you’re doing a favor by making music.”

In that lens, the band’s sincerity and heartfelt appreciation make a little more sense. It’s not that the band is uniquely positive or oddly grateful; perhaps it’s that the rest of the indie pop industry should be more so. Fans can only hope that artists are as impassioned and invested in the craft they choose as Pains is.

In terms of his own musical foundation, Berman has a relatively simple – although welcome – outlook.

“We just try to focus on writing good pop songs because that’s what we really like to do,” he said through a grin. “We just think of ourselves as making pop music. I think good pop songs transcend space and time, not to get too ‘Star Trek’-y. A good song is a good song, and it can be from the ’60s or the ’80s or 2009.”

It’s hard to gauge whether there is much that gets the band down. Berman offers a hypothetical that shows a glimmer of his steady humor: “[If] most people are like, ‘They play the genre of suck. They’re a suck revival band. Remember when stuff used to suck? They’re bringing suck back.’ I guess that would be a bummer,” he laughed.

The Pains of Being Pure at Heart ultimately is all that Berman can see himself doing. He recounts that he has no other utilizable skills other than softball, drinking V8, and playing video games; not exactly the most marketable of portfolios.

“I don’t really have any hobbies,” he said. “It made me sad the other day. I was trying to think of things I’m interested in life besides music. It’s not like music is the only thing I care about. But there’s nothing more fun for me than playing music. … It’s sort of the kind of thing my life is based on.”

For Berman, he’s fallen into the only things he knows. At the very least, it’s a reason to smile.

Conducting a Contrast

ume

words by Elliot Cole
photos by Randy Cremean

Lauren Larson – frontwoman of Austin three-piece Ume (pronounced oo-mey) – is, in many ways, the antithesis of rock stardom. It's an arduous task to picture her flinging a TV off of a hotel balcony or gnawing off a bat's head. No, Larson and company (her bassist/husband Eric Larson and drummer Jeff Barrera) isn't a band of alcoholic binges or "Golden God" moments. There are no Sid and Nancy meltdowns or Gallagher brothers-like inner tension. Personally, Ume is far removed from the downward spiral usually associated with the pantheon of rock 'n' roll debauchery. They don't immediately strike you as a group that could carry the torch of Austin's best new rock band. But then they take the stage …

"I'm an unlikely candidate to be some sort of rocker woman," Larson laughs.

She is soft-spoken and articulate, inoffensive but direct. She's also dead-on in her analysis: with her long, blonde hair; petite frame; and infectious, upbeat spirit, she doesn't make for the typecast rockstar. She's far too intelligent, far too jovial, and far too composed to be the same girl that, night-in and night-out, is known for thrashing around on stage like a crazed banshee.

This is the inner contradiction of Ume. To the naked eye, the trio doesn't seem like the type to unleash the sonic outbursts that they do. Before pursuing a career in music, Larson was pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy. Eric Larson does computer freelance work. She remarks that the band is "probably reading" in their spare time. They are bright-eyed and innocent, by all accounts sweet-hearted, and, at times, shy.

Ume's stage presence, however, foils preconceptions. With a melodic take on the rock paradigm, Ume infuses dabs of shoegaze, 1990s punk, indie, and alternative rock into a bittersweet package. It can bare fangs when necessary, with distorted riffs that twist around Larson's crackling, raspy vocals. It also can resonate with trance-inducing spaciousness, weaving through crafty pop arches and twisting through sweetened melodies. It's as though Brody Dalle from The Distillers/Spinnerette cleaned herself up and bought a few Pretty Girls Make Graves and Sonic Youth records.

Larson identifies herself as a product of the DIY punk crowd, not the trendy Austin hipster demographic. At age 14, she started playing with older musicians in the Houston area, connecting with the hardcore crowd before joining her first band, 12 Blades.

"We were terrible, just 30-second thrashy songs," she said.

Eric Larson attended their first show, setting the foundation for Ume, which would form years later. That DIY ethic would allow the band to self-release *Sunshower*, five tracks of thoughtful-but-rough rock songs, including the radio-worthy single "The Conductor". The band plans on recording a much-anticipated full-length

in 2010.

After moving to Austin a few years ago, Ume garnered a reputation for a heavy live show, which has emphasized the fact that Ume is a book not to be judged by its cover.

"I think there is certainly a contrast. We are pretty low-key, pretty tight people. I think – looking at us – people don't expect us to be a hard-rocking band," Lauren Larson said. "But I kind of like to shatter the expectations that way. I enjoy the crowd's reaction in that sense. I might be shy [or] nervous between songs, but when we're actually playing, [we have] the chance to really go for it."

It's not the first time Larson has caught people off guard. When she's not being mistaken for the band's merch girl (as was the case at a recent Toronto show), she's also had to overlook a few arched eyebrows as a woman in a male-dominated genre. Larson embraces the role, transforming into an ambassador for female rockers.

"I always hear the typical, 'You really rock for a girl. I never see girl guitarists like that,' " she said. "Even when I was really young, I always wanted to be seen … not as some girl guitarist or a woman guitarist, [but] as a musician first and foremost. The fact that I still play and people are surprised that a girl can play guitar makes me realize there's still a ways to go in that sense."

Rather than just acknowledging the problem, Larson is doing something about it.

"One of the things I really work with is I teach guitar and work as a band coach with girls at a Girl Rock Camp Austin," she said. "I really am motivated to really inspire a lot of girls and woman musicians and letting them know they can use music to express themselves."

Ume's lesson in contradiction extends past their personalities or gender. They are more likely to discuss their DIY ethics and label hunting before they talk about their social patterns or their favorite bar. Larson calls music a "career," describing the band's motivations toward having control over their future.

"It's kind of our goal," she explained. "It's so good for a band nowadays to own your own masters and own your own publishing. Sometimes, … you can lose control. It'd be nice to have kind of a partnership with a label because of the resources they can provide. There are still certain alliances you have to have. We understand that."

If it doesn't sound like a prototypical rock band, don't worry. Ume is fine with the contradiction. Larson recounts a story when she first became involved in the hardcore scene.

"[This guy] was like, 'Well, you must the dancer.' That's always stuck with me. It was one of the most insulting things ever. I'd be like, 'One day, they'll be surprised.' "

For Larson and Ume, that day has arrived.

"We are pretty low-key, pretty tight people. I think – looking at us – people don't expect us to be a hard-rocking band. But I kind of like to shatter the expectations that way. I enjoy the crowd's reaction in that sense. I might be shy [or] nervous between songs, but when we're actually playing, [we have] the chance to really go for it."

Q&A with James Graham of

the twilight sad

words by Andy Pareti
photos by Randy Cremean

Writing songs can serve many different purposes. It can make you remember, it can make you forget, it can move you and it can paralyze you. For The Twilight Sad's James Graham, writing songs is a way of beating the past – of remembering a dark time in his life and reminding him of how far he's come. Like many songwriters with a personal bent, Graham shadows his secrets in curious wordplay, leading his listeners through a hedge maze of emotional darkness that cannot be overcome without incorporating and relating the listener's own closeted skeletons. But Graham's past is so mysteriously wrought that he often hides his songs' meanings from even himself, spilling out words onto paper before his mind can interpret them – perhaps the product of some Freudian defense mechanism.

Graham will never divulge his secrets, but for Soundcheck Magazine, he did shed some light on his songwriting style, adding even more dimensions to his continually fascinating psyche.

SM: The Twilight Sad seem to be influenced significantly by the melancholy of the 1980s new wave/goth scene. This is a trend I'm seeing more and more in today's music, and I'm wondering if you think this reflects the outlook young people have in our society today? For example, do you think something like the failing economy provokes a tendency toward somber music? Or is the source more internal, personal?

JG: All of the lyrics in our songs are very personal. I write about where we are from, the people we know, things that have happened to me or my friends and family. I don't think I could write about anything else. I can't see us doing a political album or any social commentating, if I am honest. I find writing lyrics quite therapeutic, as in it helps you get things off your chest, and ultimately, being in a band for three years, I haven't noticed the failing economy, as I haven't had any money to lose!

SM: The songs you feature on your debut, *Fourteen Autumns & Fifteen Winters*, were the first songs you ever wrote. Was that a gamble, or were you confident in the integrity of these songs?

JG: At the time, we never really thought about it too much; those were the songs that we had, and we had an album to record, so we just got on with it. I don't think it was a gamble because those songs document where we were in our lives at that time, and looking back, I am still very proud of them.

SM: Some of your earliest live shows were very different – lots of long, experimental jams. What made you decide to change your sound? Do you personally prefer the restraint of traditional pop music or the liberation of experimentalism? How do you incorporate both into your music?

JG: In the early days of the band, we were still trying to find our sound, and I hadn't even attempted to write a lyric or a melody. One day, Andy [MacFarlane, who plays guitar and accordion] gave me some music to try and write a song to, and "That Summer At Home I Had Become the Invisible Boy" came out. It wasn't a conscious decision to change; it was just the natural progression of the band. We are all fans of a good song and experimentation at the same time, and we always start off by writing the song. Then try and experiment with it as much as we can to the point where the song still shines through.

SM: *Forget the Night Ahead* incorporates a few tracks with long stretches of noise and feedback. Is this sort of those early musical aspirations coming to the surface?

JG: We wanted to make an album that flowed and wasn't just song after song after song. We wanted to put in some musical interludes to give some breathing space within the record for us and the listener. I think we will always have those tendencies to have long stretches of noise and feedback, as we enjoy doing that.

SM: You tend to word your lyrics in cryptic ways. Do you want people to discover what these songs are literally about, or is it more the emotions they trigger that are important?

JG: As I said earlier, there is something therapeutic about writing lyrics. I have never told anybody what the songs are about, not even anybody in the band. I would like to think people would look at my lyrics and relate them back to themselves or a place and time in their lives. My favorite songs are the ones where I don't actually know what they are about, and I can relate back to myself; sometimes finding out what a song is actually about can ruin the whole illusion you have made in your head about that song. So no, I don't want them to find out what the songs are about, but I do want the songs to trigger some sort of emotion in people.

SM: How do you write such a song that, as you said, you don't actually know what they are about? Would you compare it to a stream-of-conscious kind of writing?

JG: Yeah, I would. The first song on *Fourteen Autumns [&] Fifteen Winters*, "Cold Days from the Birdhouse", was one of those songs. I wrote it one night and didn't really know what it was about. Then a year down the line, I was singing it somewhere and it clicked with me, and I knew why I had wrote that and what it was about. There are some songs like that on the second record, and I am sure over time, they will make sense to me. It's really strange, and I can't explain why and how it happens; it just does.

SM: I know you don't give away what your lyrics literally mean, so I won't bother asking. But maybe you'll tell me this. The first album seemed to tackle mostly childhood demons. Is there a different target on *Forget the Night Ahead*?

JG: People say that about the first record, and maybe there were one or two songs that dealt with my childhood, but I never really thought about it at the time; what came out came out. The second record revolves around a two-month period in my life where I was none too proud of my antics, and I lost someone very close to me and didn't deal with it too well. So the title kind of explains it all: Some nights, I wanted to forget about, and some other nights, I did forget due to going out and doing things that I shouldn't have been doing.

SM: How much of a narrative connection is there between the music and the lyrics? If the lyrics leave unanswered questions, does the music answer them? How do you communicate this with the rest of the band when writing a song?

JG: To be honest, we don't talk too much about it. We all understand where we are coming from, and when Andy gets my melodies and lyrics, he works hard at creating the structure and musical parts around what I am saying. We all live with the songs for a couple of weeks and then come together in the rehearsal studio to try and make it as good as possible.

SM: The music you make is very dark. If it is as autobiographical as you say it is, do you feel a release when you sing these songs? Or does it bring back pain?

JG: I think singing the songs every night is a good reminder of where I was at a dark time in my life and that I should be glad I am not in that place anymore. So I suppose there is some sort of release when playing live. It's pretty intense when we play live.

SM: Your music often integrates a thick, Phil Spector-ish wall of sound. Glasvegas, another Glasgow band, use a similar technique in an attempt to make it sound "orchestral." Would you say that word describes your music, too?

JG: I think we are coming from a different place than that band that you mention. Our music is honest, loud, and we are not trying to be something that we are not.

SM: While most of the influences I hear in The Twilight Sad are from the '80s, they really vary in genre, from U2 to The Smiths to Joy Division. Is there a dominant artist or sub-genre that you listened to growing up?

JG: I listened to Joy Division and The Smiths a lot when I was younger like most teenagers do – and if not, they should. I don't like U2, though. I listened to a lot of independent Scottish bands, usually bands on Chemikal Underground [Records] such as Arab Strap, Mogwai, and The Delgados. It's pretty weird, as we have either worked with or are really good friends with these people now. It's a funny, small world.

The great Western unknown. If you grew up with your eyes on the Atlantic and you listened to enough 1960s rock 'n' roll, you could have unwittingly slipped into a fantasy world where California is a magical kingdom of counterculture hillsides and alleyways that clang with the echoes of music, and everywhere in between is some damned mystery that needs solving. Especially when you're young and the world outside seems so big, the idea of leaving home to trek westward can seem like a sort of wayfaring pilgrimage – a duty to your inner rock 'n' roll Jiminy Cricket. Tim Crane, born and raised in Massachusetts, knew that he couldn't run around handing out fliers in exchange for free records forever.

Crane was an unsuccessful musician who was bouncing around jobs in land surveying, construction, demolition and a lumber yard, where there were "old dudes missing fingers" and "it would be zero degrees outside and you're stacking lumber and whipping chains around." But there was something that was following him his whole life, ever since his father would sing him to sleep with Howlin' Wolf's "Little Red Rooster" and other old blues songs.

"I was skippin' school to go hang out at the record store," Crane said. "The records that were really catching my ear was stuff like James Brown and Ray Charles and Dr. John – just the whole mass of funky sounds, kind of the visceral rawness of it."

Whether it was his father, the record store, or the shit jobs that had him singing some real blues, Crane decided to buy a special Amtrak ticket that was good for a month, and rode the rails around the country, those mystical places such as Los Angeles and New Orleans and Memphis finally materializing into reality.

One place that seemed to stand out above them all was Austin, Texas.

"It seems like everybody in town here is interested in music," Crane said. "Young people, old people, … that's the way I feel about music – it's a daily thing for me."

After not too long, it became his stock-in-trade, as well. Adopting the name T Bird and rounding up a massive, 10-person band called The Breaks, Crane rose quickly along the recently forged soul revival path that has been navigated by bands such as Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings and Black Joe Lewis & the Honeybears.

"When you get addicted to music and you need a shot, you go find that sound that you're jonesin' for, and if [I] have the inspiration to create something, some of what comes out is definitely gonna be influenced by that soul-funk [I've] been listening to."

With one album, the January-released *Learn About It*, under his belt and another one being recorded, Crane is not wasting any time in making a name for himself in the very competitive Austin music scene. It's fortuitous (or maybe it's destiny) that Crane seems built for the South. His New England cadence already has a bit of Southern drawl mixed in (Breaks guitarist Johnny "Too-Bad" Allison will "blow yur mind every time he picks up a gee-tar.") and he loves his whisky and bourbon. Check that – he just loves his alcohol: "Man, I like it all! Put it in front of me, I'll drink it!"

The same, naturally, goes for his music, which he describes with a fittingly fermented metaphor.

"When you get addicted to music and you need a shot, you go find that sound that you're jonesin' for, and if [I] have the inspiration to create something, some of what comes out is definitely gonna be influenced by that soul-funk [I've] been listening to," he said.

Crane's musical tastes span much farther than Motown, though. He muses about collaborating with Beck or Tom Waits, of singing on stage with Etta James, and incorporating his love for hip-hop into his upcoming second album. A big Wu-Tang fan, Crane likes the idea of hip-hop being the next link on the evolutionary chain of R&B music and hopes this flavor can give The Breaks a new angle while still remaining familiar.

As T Bird, Crane has the kind of swagger of a seasoned rock 'n' roller, but he remains sincerely reverent to his musical heroes. T Bird and the Breaks played a tribute to Stax Records, the company that unleashed such hitmakers as Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes and The Staple Singers. To Crane and his band, Memphis and New Orleans are sacred temples. But the band is no simple flashback novelty act; they know real soul, and *Learn About It* smears its soul with anything from snarling rock to Motown R&B. "Juice" opens with a very Dr. Dog-ian piano line before the song flexes its muscle through a funky horn section, organs, and the Breaks' several backup singers. "Stand Up", meanwhile, opens immediately with a chugging, locomotive bassline and struts its Curtis Mayfield-style groove. *Learn About It* is named after a saying Crane and his friends used to use, and it seems to be a philosophy that is bringing them much success.

Crane still thinks about living elsewhere, such as New Orleans or Philadelphia, but Austin clearly has changed him. It has freed him to do something that he couldn't do before, for people who love him for it.

"At least where I was from, that [positive reception] didn't seem to be the case, so I was pretty excited to be in a place where music mattered a little bit more to people," he said.

He sings on "Blackberry Brandy", "*Workin' hard, hardly workin' / You can take me out / And put some other jerk in*", possibly to exorcise some of the bitterness of his pre-music career experiences.

"I've worked so many shitty jobs," he said. But then, you can't keep a good soul man down for long, and Crane later quipped, "I guess if it doesn't kill you, right?"

Truer words don't apply to T Bird and the Breaks, who continue to grow stronger with every whisky shot and turned stone along Crane's sprawling musical journey.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