



ETERNAL SUNSHINE

It's tough to stay positive these days, but **the Octopus Project** make it look—and sound—easy. Is there something wrong with them, or is it us?

To describe the Octopus Project as an instrumental band is to miss the big picture on two counts. For one thing, words seem beside the point for the Austin quartet: Their songs aren't so much vehicles for human expression as living creatures, untamed and undocumented, with exotic plumage and curious mating habits. »

STORY BY DANIEL LEVIN BECKER
NY PHOTOS BY JORDAN HOLLENDER
LA PHOTOS BY DREW REYNOLDS

Words seem beside the point for the Austin quartet: their songs aren't so much vehicles for human expression as **living creatures, untamed and undocumented**, with exotic plumage and curious mating habits.

Second, one gets the impression that they're more than just a band—a little bit brand, a little bit philosophy—and that, although they play instruments and record albums and tour relentlessly, they don't do any of it simply because it's what bands do. They do it because they're curious, because exploration and discovery still thrill them, because cynicism is the standard and they have little interest in standards.

They sell stuffed animals and tissue pouches for their press photos. The optimism that propels the Octopus Project would be unfashionable if it weren't also a little bit strange.

Predictably, pinpointing their style is not a simple exercise. They don't indulge in the apocalyptic gloom of post-rock or the jaded posturing of electroclash, but nod to both on the way elsewhere. They switch from majestic anthem rock to fractured electro-noodlerly at a moment's notice, and win awards in categories like "best miscellaneous instrument" at the 2007 Austin, Texas, music awards. They'll tell you what bands they like, not what kind of band they are (though of the myriad descriptions they've garnered, their favorite is "ambidextrous equipment failure junk-tronica"); their open-mindedness borders on defiance, but they're consummately positive about it. "I think any instrument, anything that can make sound, even if it's the lamest thing in the world, can be exciting," says Josh Lambert who, along with his wife Yvonne and film school cohort Toto Miranda, started the Project in 1999. "There are too many things that we're excited about doing to worry about what we shouldn't be doing," agrees Miranda.

To date, the band's records and live shows have expanded their sonic arsenal far past the standard guitar-drums-sequencer lineup, routinely calling on trombone, glockenspiel, all manner of strings, and the inimitably sci-fi theremin—an instrument made up of oscillators and antennas, designed to be played without being touched. Unlike the mirthless technical mastery on display in many instrumental ensembles, the Project's compositions go out of the way to embrace the new, the strange, the broken. "It's fun to find yourself a little bit lost with what

you're doing," Lambert reflects. "The most exciting aspects of the band to me are those that contrast between the instruments we have experience with and the ones we're just starting to explore."

"We never sat down and talked about it, but part of the idea was to keep the horizon as broad as possible in terms of the sounds we could use and the building blocks at our disposal," agrees Miranda. "I think we're just excited to be like, 'This sound is awesome!' or 'I really want to try this!' There's always a big picture that we're working toward, but it's never put into so many words." And for a band so intent on staying clear of limitations, a band whose members use the word "exciting" in every other sentence and mean it each time, the big picture is as big as music itself.

On record, inspiration rarely hits the same spot twice. The Octopus Project recently released their third album, *Hello, Avalanche*, on Austin's sleeper hit factory Peek-A-Boo Records; its greatest affinity with the two previous records is that it's hard to imagine anyone else making it. A learn-as-you-go attitude has remained unspoken band policy since the beginning (to hear Miranda tell it, "It was kind of like, 'Let's start a band!' 'Okay!' 'What's this?' 'I don't know!'"), but the learning curve has made a difference, too. *Avalanche* manages a cleaner, more magnified sound than past albums because each second delivers a greater degree of deliberateness and confidence. For instance, it features the theremin more prominently because, by her own account, Yvonne "learned how to actually play it."

Still, album to album, the Project's evolution doesn't involve sanding down rough edges as much as finding new tools to carve them with. Between the sprawling Sega-pop jams of 2002's *Identification Parade* and the gritty rock euphoria of 2005's *One Ten Hundred Thousand Million*, the band didn't junk their old moves, they just repurposed and rewired them. The debut has songs like "Rorol," which spends 2 1/2 minutes letting clusters of guitar notes languish in spooky near-silence and then plays the whole thing backwards. The second album softens the experimental bent but doesn't drop it: for example, the sublimely messy "Tuxedo Hat" develops around a drum loop accidentally recorded at the wrong sample rate. »

Opposite: The OP capture your inner smile. Foreground, counter-clockwise from bottom: Yvonne & Josh Lambert, Ryan Figg. Background: Toto Miranda.

PHOTO BY: DREW REMOIDS OPPOSITE PAGE: JORDAN HOLLENDER





“Starting out, I felt like since we weren’t singing I had to rock out as much as I possibly could on stage, just to make it that much more interesting visually.”

The seat-of-the-pants spirit still resonates throughout *Avalanche*, much of which sounds like it was made using dangerously overheated equipment. “Upmann” features a guitar part recorded on Lambert’s laptop from a porch in Atlanta, then looped—hence the same car going by every four bars. “Bees Bein’ Strugglin’” could be the most genial patchwork of seemingly unrelated themes since “Bohemian Rhapsody.” On the other hand, there’s “Truck,” a ridiculously nimble jam in 7/8 time, and “I Saw The Bright Shiniest,” which finds an entire choir of theremins harmonizing with one another like a flock of amorous alien songbirds. Complementing the short-circuit lunacy of the band’s joy to be making music is a sense of dignity and self-assurance that wouldn’t have seemed so likely circa 2002.

“*Identification Parade* was pretty much just demos that we were writing as we were recording them,” Lambert explains. “*One Ten* came from us playing hundreds of shows between records and getting a better sense of how we all interact together live.” Indeed, the more they

played, the more elementally their process evolved. “We would initially work on our stuff at home or individually, and then later on figure out how to play it,” Miranda recalls. “By the time we got around to putting a show together, the songs would be written in a totally different context, so we’d have to sit down and work out what amounts to choreography to be able to pull them off live: ‘Okay, we can do it with this sample over here, then you play this part and switch to this instrument.’”

“If anything, when we go to finally record a song now, we’re trying to capture what we do live,” says Yvonne. “About half the songs [on *Avalanche*] we had been playing live for a while, and so we knew exactly what we wanted them to sound like. It wasn’t as much an exploration process, wasn’t as much ‘What could this sound like?’ as we were writing it.”

“Some of the songs, like ‘I Saw The Bright Shiniest,’ were written mostly in the studio—but ‘Truck,’ for instance, we’d been playing for a year or a year and a half,” says Miranda.

PHOTO: DREW RENOLDS

“Pretty much every time we play that song live, we have the same sense of excitement as after we finished writing it,” adds Lambert. “That instant where we’re just like, ‘Fuck yeah! This song is awesome!’”

Onstage, the band’s members switch instruments as a matter of course, sometimes mid-song. Yvonne bewitches the theremin like an oddly indecisive snake charmer while Lambert and Miranda, whatever station they happen to be manning, gyrate and full-body headbang to all available rhythms (the newest recruit, guitarist Ryan Figg, also gets into it, but with less limb-flailing). The effect is neither theatrical nor self-conscious; it’s just clear that the performers are entertaining themselves as much as they’re entertaining the audience.

Last year the Octopus Project played at the Coachella Festival after being elected to do so by the Myspace community at large, despite their not knowing they had been nominated. Aesop Rock handpicked them to support a national Def Jux tour in fall 2007, although they plainly belong to a different genre than that label’s sky-is-falling clutter-hop. The question of genre seems even more irrelevant in person than on record: What’s important is presence and energy, and the Project offers bright shiny things and balloons and sustained craziness in spades.

“Starting out, I felt like since we weren’t singing I had to rock out as much as I possibly could on stage, just to make it that much more interesting visually,” says Lambert. Time has proven that concern groundless, and fans frequently confess after shows that they didn’t even notice there were no vocals—except, as the story goes, in the case of Flaming Lips chieftain Wayne Coyne, who saw the Project in Oklahoma last year. “We played the worst show we’ve ever played in our lives,” Miranda recalls. “We were all *really* sick and we had just played five or six shows at South by Southwest. We’d slept like an hour the night before, we were totally exhausted, we’d left a bunch of gear at home and had to borrow shit—it was just bad all around. We didn’t talk to [Coyne] afterwards, but he talked to our friends who ran the club. He said, ‘Yeah, they’re pretty good, but maybe they should try singing.’”

There lies, on that note, one important difference between *Hello, Avalanche* and what came before: They do try singing. At the very end of the record Toto, Josh and Yvonne sing three nursery rhyme verses, equal parts sweet and strange, over a bed of chirping laptops and chiming bells:

*Saluting tone, noise bloomed in full
Vermilion skies, clouds made of tea
We ride upon their harmony.*

The song, “Queen,” manages to distill all the dreamy extravagance of a band whose only intelligible recorded

DAVE GAHAN
HOURGLASS
Featuring KINGDOM
Available on CD, Deluxe CD/DVD and Vinyl
BEST BUY
davegahan.com
www.myspace.com/davegahanofficial
© 2007 Mute Records Ltd., under exclusive license in the United States to Virgin Records America, Inc.



Of the myriad descriptions they've garnered, their favorite is "ambidextrous equipment failure junk-tronica."



words until now were "music is happiness." But it also underlines how much room is left for them to explore, how many building blocks are still at their disposal. "Up until this point I don't think any of our songs even felt like they *should* have vocals," says Yvonne. "This one felt like it needed something, that a vocal part would have just the right texture and feel. In the future, if we have another song that feels that way, I think we wouldn't hesitate to put vocals in it."

Other songs should be so lucky. That absence of calculation is what makes the band—to borrow a phrase—exciting. It's the evolution rather than the individual moment that's rewarding to savor, for the band as much as for the listener, the way everything they do harmonizes into one bright, uncynical whole. Each song becomes at once a means and an end; to buy into the Octopus Project is, on some level, to forget the difference between the two. That's what they can teach the young and restless in us, without even saying a word: the patience to paint the big picture one sound at a time. ◊

WHY STOP THERE?

Given the tirelessness of their boundary-nudging curiosity, it's probably only a matter of time before the Octopus Project transcend the laws of physics altogether. We asked the cephalopod squad to each describe their fantasy sci-fi instrument, and by doing so, give us a preview of junktronica to come:

1) Qui Qui

by Josh Lambert (guitar, bass, keyboards):
My instrument is called a qui qui. It's an animal that lives primarily in the forest, but has also been domesticated by humans. A qui qui is usually about 15 feet tall and has a bone stretching between its two legs. Tendons span between the bone and the upper part between its legs, creating a harp-like instrument. When plucked, the tendons resonate through the bone, up through the body and out through its ears. The plucking of the tendons is actually a source of energy for the qui qui, so by playing them, the player is helping it out. In the wild, qui qui rub themselves against tree branches to make the sounds/provide energy. They sound like giant, organic harps. Hearing a pack of qui qui in the wild can be an amazing experience!

2) Joost

by Yvonne Lambert (samplers, keyboards, theremin, glockenspiel, guitar):
The joost is an instrument that produces a sound that can only be described as a mixture of a glass harmonica and a thousand babies harmonizing on a mountaintop. The bottom knobs are used to stimulate the bird into varying degrees of wing-flapping that sends vibrations up to the glass bells on top of the instrument. The keyboard sends notes through the vibrating bells. Birds must be highly trained to achieve an esteemed position (and home) in a joost.

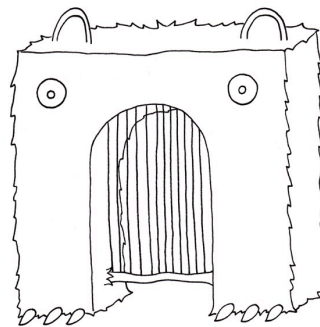
3) Lesser Electric Keybird

by Toto Miranda (drums, guitar, bass):
After a musician plays a melody on the bird's keys, the bird will remember the tune and add it to its repertoire. Its sound recalls an old gramophone or wax cylinder... dusty and crackling, but sweetly melodic. Keybirds in the wild can be heard to play arrangements made from bits of all the tunes they've learned to date. Symphonies can be arranged by assembling a flock of keybirds, each one playing its part. Usually they're fairly cooperative, although they do have a flair for improvisation that can be hard for them to resist.

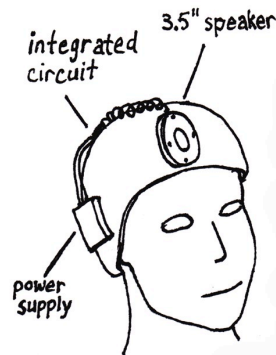
4) Time Travel Melody Memory Reproduction Unit

by Ryan Figg (guitar, bass, keyboards):
By means of standard time travel this device retrieves, then plays, the wearer's last forgotten, original melody.

PHOTO: JORDAN HOLLENDER

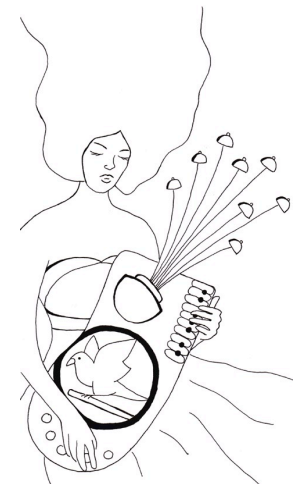


1



4

2



3



RESONANCE MAGAZINE

55

RESONANCE MAGAZINE

54