



Crystal magic

Crystal Antlers gobble up old soul. Plus: Zigaboo Modaliste, QBert, Blackalicious, and more ...

By Kimberly Chun

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SONIC REDUCER Light a candle, burn a wand of sage, and singe your bangs. Then fondle a frosty pink hunk of rose quartz and ask the goddess, "Are crystals the new wolves — or at least the new bears? Maybe even the new alps/mountains?" 'Cause I swear, I'm not a miner — '49-er, tweenie-bopper, or otherwise — but I can almost smell the crystals *everywhere*. Especially when it comes to artist-band names like Crystal Castles, Crystal Stilts, Crystal Waters, and wow, now juxtaposing crystal with defensive head-growths, Crystal Antlers.

I clash gently this sparkling SOMA morning with said smiling, scruffy, shambolic Long Beach combo — half chimney sweeps by day and all capable of metamorphosing magically into fierce psych-garage warriors by the light of a mountain-wolf-bear moon. The obvious question goes to tousled vocalist-bassist Jonny Bell, his hoodie bunched over his brow in the very un-Cali cold and just roused from his slumber at Closer Recording where the band is completing its first full-length: what is it about crystals that resonates? Is this a conspiracy (of beards)? And more importantly — the goddess craves a response after spotting those vaginal folds on the cover of Crystal Antlers' recent self-titled Touch and Go EP — do you believe in crystal magic?

"Yeah, well, we came up with the name three years ago, so we didn't know about those other bands," mumbles Bell, weary of being given the crystal shit. "We've done a lot of interviews where they ask about that, and I've given a lot of sarcastic answers." The non-sarcastic rejoinder? "It sounded fragile."

No wonder the band leader is a wee bit wary about conjuring a name for the Crystal Antlers' album, due out in April, which he says sports mellow and ambient musical percolations as well as "more of a soul influence." Crystal Antlers have been gobbling up old soul from '60s Miami like Della Humphrey and George McRae and spilling out their own revamp — strained through the filter of their punk background and miles away from the well-inked and -oiled Daptone/Mark Ronson new-old-school. Judging from the EP produced by Mars Volta's Isaiah "Ikey" Owens, Crystal Antlers roam another neck of the woods altogether: a noisier, more distorted dead meadow where hirsute beasties like Comets on Fire and Mammatus roam near Holy Mountains, where Andrew King's careening guitar skirts squalling psych-cacophony and Victor Rodriguez's textural, low-screaming organ revels in a garage-goth parking lot, out behind the rock 'n' roll wilderness preserve.

"We wanted to try to play beyond our abilities," Bell says of the recording. "I think we're always trying to push our limits, and a lot of stuff on the EP was really difficult for us. None of us have any formal training." Noisy, dark matter far from the manic weekday traffic tearing down Howard Street as the Crystal Antlers tuck into eggs and bagels at a café near the studio.

It's the kind of recession-strapped, pre-Christmas week — a ruthless admixture of hope and fear — that brings out the take-that holiday light displays in the Mission and makes it a great moment to get your fill of your friendly neighborhood Bay Area bands, as the clubs stock up on local talents choosing to staycation. Instead Crystal Antlers are here, forsaking primo chimney sweep season ("I can write songs while laying bricks," explains Bell. "It's a nice contrast to sitting in a van") to record with engineer Joe Goldring (the Enablers, Touched by a Janitor). Today they'll track keyboards, saxophone, and vocals, though Bell caught a cold from bunking down in their veggie-oil van during last week's hail.

At least they're out of the vehicle — now convalescing on a SoMa byway — though Bell is proud that it got the band out and on tour on a single tank of diesel. "Ten thousand miles and we only used one tank of diesel fuel the whole time. We were able to find vegetable oil all around the country," he says. "We filled up when we were leaving for the tour. We didn't go to a single gas station the whole time on the way back." The group's recent Fuck Yeah tour with Monotonix, Dan Deacon, the Death Set, and others was similarly veggie-oil-fueled, though somewhat nuttier from the sound of the stories of smashed vans and spilled instruments that drummer and kindred chimney sweep Kevin Stuart regales me with. There was also that time when Crystal Antlers were in Oakland, touring with Canada's Fucked Up, and Bell offers, munching, "Kevin forgot to lock the trailer."

"Hey, I didn't forget it!" Stuart protests. "That was Fucked Up's fault!"

"We started driving," continues Bell, "and all their stuff started falling out onto the freeway." Word from the goddess: unlock that Crystal power — with limits. *

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The Meters percussion mainstay whoops it up for his b-day. With Bhi Bhiman. Sat/27, 9 p.m., \$20. Café du Nord, 2170 Market, SF. www.cafedunord.com

BLACKALICIOUS

Gift of Gab's Mighty Underdogs project weighs in at this hefty indie hip-hop hoedown. Sat/27, 9 p.m., \$26.50. Fillmore, 1805 Geary, SF. www.livenation.com

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TOMMY GUERRERO'S GET RAD SIX

Skating, designing, music-making — Tommy Guerrero veers off from Jet Black Crayon with his birthday bash band at this SF Food Bank benefit. With Marc and the Casuals. Tues/30, 8 p.m., \$6–\$10 sliding scale. Hemlock Tavern, 1131 Polk, SF. www.hemlocktavern.com

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