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Exclusive: Fragility, Mayhem, and Crystal Antlers' Sound

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by [Jennifer Kelly](#)



Live at [the Yard](#) in Brooklyn, on a sticky summer day, [Crystal Antlers](#) is cranking out a sludgy 1960s groove; bassist, singer, and songwriter Jonny Bell in shorts, bobs in time with the heavy beat, his long hair flying. Victor Rodriguez flails at an old Farfisa, his body locked in an up and down motion as he pounds the keys, while guitarist Andrew King is bent over his amps, wheedling a high, space-echo'd feedback out of the sound system. Shirtless drummer Kevin Stuart pounds a relentless cadence of toms and cymbals, and somewhere auxiliary percussionist Sexual Chocolate (Damian Edwards to his mom) is slapping a set of well-worn bongos, nailing a cymbal occasionally for emphasis. There's a wild centripetal swirl to the band's performance, as parts seem to fly off in all directions, yet also an undeniable, rock-steady core.

That core, says Bell, is the songs themselves. "In the middle of everything chaotic, there's a real song there. I could play them on piano and they would sound like regular songs," he explained. "But everybody adds their own element, and when we get together as a band it becomes something else. That's when it becomes chaotic."

Even the band's name expresses this fundamental contradiction, the sheer explosive power of its performance balanced with the likelihood of self-immolation. "We were looking for a name that expressed the state of being really fragile, because we felt like we were," said Bell. "Every time we played together, it felt like everything was going to fall apart, but it never quite did. I had a dream reader do an analysis, and if you dream of crystal antlers, you're imagining the fragility of the masculine."

Fragile, maybe, but also enveloping, transporting, mind-shifting. You could close your eyes and believe you were at Altamont, Isle of Wight — any of the legendary '60s rock festivals, really - but frontman Bell says that he sees Crystal Antlers as more of a punk band than a psych outfit. The band, whose members grew up on Southern California's punk scene, revere Black Flag over Blue Cheer, and unlike heavy psych contemporaries like Comets on Fire and Howlin' Rain, they perform well defined, premeditated song structures. "We don't jam. We don't improvise. Everything we do, we do with intent," said Bell.

Crystal Antlers formed around 2007 in Long Beach while some of its members were still in

high school. Originally a three-piece, the band has since expanded and contracted (mostly expanded) to include second percussionist Edwards, King (when original member Errol Davis left), and then to welcome Davis back this spring. At one time, everyone in the band was working for an old punk rocker who had started a chimney sweeping company. It was this boss who bought Crystal Antlers their first Farfisa and encouraged them to cover old '60s songs that showcased its inimitable sound. The band's first single, self-recorded and self-released, covered Blue Cheer covering Mose Allison's "Parchman Farm." The '60s references, which still seem to chafe Bell a little, started right then, right there.

"A lot of people say that they hear '60s psychedelia in our music," he admitted. "But to us, we're still kind of playing punk music. When we'd started none of us had ever played together. We were just trying to take this band and make something new. And what came out sort of ended up sounding like that, I think mostly because of the organ. We started playing with the organ, and it sounded very cheesy '60s, so it was more a necessity than anything else. And I think the way that Victor plays it is pretty far outside anything from the '60s."

The band first gained traction with its 2008 EP, produced by the Mars Volta's Ikey Edwards. A sweaty, surging blend of psychedelia, garage, soul and punk, the EP earned an [8.5 rating from Pitchfork](#) and set off a mild media frenzy. Seizing the moment, they quit jobs, terminated leases, hopped a used school bus fueled with vegetable oil and joined the Fuck Yeah Tour with No Age in the summer of 2008. "That was such a risky decision," Bell remembered. "We lost our jobs, our apartments...We just dedicated everything to the band."

But it paid off. When the band returned, it was signed to [Touch & Go](#), and poised to begin work on its full-length *Tentacles*. Bell already had a handful of songs, some of them written at the same time as the EP, others more recently plotted out on piano and Casio. With interest in the band high, there was pressure to finish quickly, but Bell noted that even so, their writing style had time to evolve. "It was much more collective this time," he said. "Everybody wrote their own parts. We wrote all together."

Now with a batch of new songs in the catalog, Crystal Antlers is touring with Constantines, the sold-out shows a far cry from early days playing biker festivals, punk squats and even, once, a wedding. Bell said they are hoping to make enough money on tour to rent a house and start recording when they return from road. There's also a concert film by videething.com's Michael Reich in the works. "It's like a post-modern tour documentary," said Bell. "Sort of like [The Hill](#), but a rock and roll version."