



## Crystal Antlers: Foot of the Mountain

By: [Jeffrey Terich](#)

In [Crystal Antlers'](#) hometown of Long Beach, California, rain is scarce, sunshine is dominant, and coastal air keeps everything light and breezy. Yet, when the band emerged in 2008 with a self-released six-song EP of dense, psychedelic punk rock, they arrived like the meeting of a hurricane and a hailstorm, plowing their listeners with one of the most exciting, intense sounds they'd likely ever heard.

Mixing a little bit of [Blue Cheer's](#) fuzzed-out riff rock, the dark psychedelia of The Doors and the hyperactive punk rock of [The Blood Brothers](#), not to mention a unique blend of noise and melody, Crystal Antlers ultimately conjure up a sound that's difficult to categorize but still maintains its sense of melody and accessibility beneath its waves of distortion and effects pedals. After the group's 2008 debut EP built up some notoriety in Internet circles, singer-bassist **Jonny Bell**, guitarist **Andrew King**, drummer **Kevin Stuart**, organist **Victor Rodriguez**, percussionist **Damian Edwards** and guitarist **Errol Davis** attracted the attention of Touch & Go Records, who promptly signed them. Less than a year later, the group released their debut full-length, [Tentacles](#) (released April 7 on Touch & Go), which, according to Bell, sums the band up nicely.



*Crystal Antlers*

"The only idea we had for this record was that it encompassed all the things we've done up to this point," says Bell. "Some of the songs were written before the EP. A lot of them are new songs. We're always writing stuff. Those songs that we use on the record are kind of what we've been doing up to this point."

The material on *Tentacles* represents a wide range of sound, from the woozy balladry of "Andrew" to the fiery-but-cold trip of "Time Erased" to the uncompromising hardcore assault of the title track. And while the songs may shift in tempo and volume, one thing that doesn't change is the intensity, which doesn't relent until the final track fades. Though that kinetic palpable tension is merely part of what the band specializes in, Bell explained that their concentrated marathon week recording session was a tense experience of its own.



*Crystal Antlers by Darren Lee*

"We recorded up in San Francisco with our friends and we were pretty much isolated," Bell says. "We pretty much never left the studio for more than 15 minutes at a time. It was very stressful, that's what we were sort of trying to create, to get it done."

With six people contributing myriad sounds, Crystal Antlers' record can be a complex beast, though according to Bell, the songwriting process is much simpler. "Usually I write all the songs by my bass or piano, and then we'll go to the practice space and see how everyone interprets them and does their own thing," he says.

*Tentacles* is very much a rock record, and loud guitars play a prominent role. Yet one striking characteristic of the album is the use of organ. Keyboards are front and center on *Tentacles* lending a vintage, psychedelic sound that sets them apart from many of their Southern California punk peers. According to Bell, the band was interested in changing how the instruments were mixed, in order to present something a little less conventional.

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"People are used to hearing guitars blare over every record, and we just wanted to experiment with that in front," Bell says. "It's very balanced."

Crystal Antlers has steadily risen in the past year, from a barely known underground punk band, to something of a big name. They toured with [Cold War Kids](#), landed a record deal and rode a wave of critical acclaim on the strength of their unsigned debut EP. Yet winter of 2008 dealt them a lousy hand, as their van, packed with all of their musical instruments,

and equipment, was stolen outside of a club in Long Beach. As Bell says, the experience was "pretty devastating." However, a caring local community helped them to get back on their feet.

"We were looking for it everywhere, right before South by Southwest," Bell says. "We had no money at all to get new stuff. The community in Long Beach was very supportive, though, and threw some benefit shows for us. A few weeks later the police found the van. We were really, really lucky. So, we donated the money [for the van] to a local animal rescue."

While the band did eventually recover their van, they ultimately had to buy back most of their gear, which can be costly for any band, let alone one on a shoestring budget. In fact, the model of bass that Johnny Bell had been playing had since gone up in value from when he had first bought it, thereby making it too expensive to buy a second time.

Crystal Antlers was dealt some more bad news in February, when Touch & Go Records announced that it would no longer be releasing any new music, and that it would exist solely to be a catalog-only label. The downsizing of the legendary independent record imprint dealt a tremendous blow to music fans all over, but for Crystal Antlers, it proposes a more direct obstacle.

For the time being, Touch & Go is still releasing *Tentacles* and will still do promotion behind the album, but after this round, the band will find themselves without a label again. Nonetheless, Bell remains optimistic, and continues to focus on one thing at a time, namely promoting and touring behind this album.

"Right now, our record's still coming out, so we're just going to work on that," Bell says. "Touch & Go is a really great and they're like family to us. It really bummed us out."

While Crystal Antlers may not be aligned with any labels in the immediate future, Bell says they're merely going to keep doing what they do. After all, they did sell 3,000 copies of their debut EP on self-promotion alone.

"We have a plan for what we're going to do," Bell said, "regardless of whether we have a label or not."

*Crystal Antlers are on tour now; dates available [here](#).*

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