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THE MAGAZINE OF ROCK

Introducing: Look Out, the Saints are Coming Through: Crystal Antlers About to Break

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by Edward Fairchild



Crystal Antlers' shows blow up. This summer the band exploded out of Long Beach, California with a slew of blog praise for their self-titled EP and soon after, their four-song collection received the coveted "Best New Music" designation from *Pitchfork*. Even though they play psychedelic garage-punk anchored by organ that sounds like it could have echoed in the court of the Crimson King, it's best you don't call them a prog band.

Lead singer Jonny Bell confesses, "To be honest, I'm totally not into prog rock, I don't feel like we're prog rock. I'm not into King Crimson and I hate Rush and I dunno, I guess it's a common misconception. The way this band came about, where the sound came from, was hours and hours of playing together in a garage. And there was no intention of being on *Pitchfork* or having a MySpace page even, it just happened." And it happened fast.

Last year, the band was relatively unknown, still playing house shows in the LBC, but just a few months later they were blowing up clubs in Brooklyn and SXSW. Bell is still not sure how it happened. "I guess it was just kind of building up steam in some ways." Over the past year a few emphatic reviews of their live show began to litter some Los Angeles music blogs, but it was the 8.5 *Pitchfork* review of their self-released EP that broke things wide open in June. "I don't even know how *Pitchfork* got the CD. I mean, none of us had ever heard of *Pitchfork* before that and I was really amazed at how powerful the internet can be, because we have seen a huge effect." Day-to-day life in the band has subsequently started to change: "Now I can't work. I have to spend all day shipping out CDs. Which is great, you know, it's a luxury problem, but for the rest of the guys, all they're doing is helping me package more CDs. We practice more."

Practice is better than sweeping chimneys, which is what they were doing. "The original line-up of the band, we were all chimney sweeping together, working for this crazy acid casualty, ex-punk rock guy. And now I have my own company, but like I said, I haven't been doing much lately with chimney sweeping." From the looks of it, things are to stay that way. The band just signed to Chicago's Touch and Go record label and is scheduled to play CMJ this October after a quick West Coast tour wraps up.

Touring has been essential to their success. The band's captivating, frenetic live performances have propelled them with word-of-mouth exposure. Witnessing their show is like witnessing a high-speed car crash—explosive. But Long Beach is not really a town known for its music scene, so getting out was elemental to sparking critical fire. "There's a few places to play. It's a pretty small scene and it's pretty local for the most part. There aren't a lot of bands making it out of Long Beach and going other places. I think one thing with us, we're not really from any scene... we live in Long Beach, but we're not really from anywhere specific, just kinda all over the place."

The band formed in 2006 after the original lineup met in high school. "That was Kevin, Errol, and I. Errol's no longer in the band. Our new guitar player, Andrew, he helped Errol's old punk band put out records, and so when Errol left the band we thought about Andrew because he was somebody that Errol looked up to as a guitar player. And Victor was just somebody that was always around and he was always really great at jamming, so we thought, 'Oh, we can probably teach him how to play organ.' His dad's a mariachi, and he comes from a really rich musical background." Victor aside, the rest of the band comes from what some might consider a lesser pedigree, with the musical DNA of several incestuous So Cal punk bands. "Damian was the person we all used to go watch play in his old punk bands. Andrew also played with Damian and H.R. from Bad Brains. So, they knew each other; they were in bands together before they were in this band."

With the help of a friend, the band put out two seven-inch singles and sold them at shows and through their MySpace page. "Our first single came out on our friend's label, Majic Wallet, and it was a label he created to put out that record. He was a bank robber and was in prison for years, and he used to play drums in Flipper and Redd Kross. Right out of prison, this was the first thing he did artistically to get back into music." The singles sold out.

If critics dubbed 2006 the "year of the wolf bands", 2008 might be the "year of the crystal bands." Another band recently getting a lot of notice is the electro-chirp band Crystal Castles, not to mention Crystal Stilts. Where some might be upset over the coincidence, Jonny seems to be more fatalistic about the similar band names. "We just wanted something nobody else had, you know?" he says with a slight chuckle, "And now everybody is asking me in interviews, 'What about—you're

just one of those 'crystal' bands!' I was kinda bummed out that there are so many bands with similar names, but there are so many band names now that there's gonna be a certain amount of cross-over with words. We were just looking for something that had a natural feeling to it, which represented how fragile natural things can be."

Last February, the band endured what has become an increasingly common tragedy among independent touring musicians—their gear was stolen. Only they weren't on tour. "We were playing in Long Beach at a venue that's about two blocks from my house, and parking is really difficult in Long Beach; so after the show, we left the van in the parking lot at the venue because there are security cameras there, and it was safer than my neighborhood, and somebody came by and stole the van in the middle of the night with all of the equipment in it." Crystal Antlers soldiered on, playing several shows over the next couple of weeks on borrowed equipment, when a phone call came one morning, informing Bell that their luck had changed. "The police called me; the guy was like, 'Found your van. Looks like it's got all the equipment in it.' And we went down and picked it up. They didn't care to dust for prints or anything. Luckily, I had no gas whatsoever in the van when I rolled into the parking lot, and it ran out of gas on them. They left it in a neighborhood about five blocks away. And you know, I spent every day riding my bike up and down every street and going to every pawn shop in Long Beach looking for it, and somehow I must have missed it because it was sitting on this side street. From the way it looked, it seemed like someone took it to take it to a chop-shop. All the equipment was locked in the back and I think they just abandoned it. It was sitting there for, I guess, two weeks. It had parking tickets on it and everything. And the way it was actually found—the police have this scanner now that reads the license plates and so it tells them to stop. Everything was there. Except for my iPod."



The band is set to record their first full-length this fall. "We're aiming for early spring to release it. I think we're gonna be recording it at this guy's house in Whittier and some at home at Damian's house. But we're spending this month mostly writing, and then we're gonna record in September and October when we have time between tours." Bell explains the process: "Songs come in two different ways. Either I'm at home and I'll write a song with just bass or just organ and then go in and everyone will kind of come up with their parts, or I'll have an idea for everybody's parts and we'll kinda all work on the arrangement together. Or it comes from times when we do jam or make noise for hours and we'll tape it and go back and listen and pull out pieces and turn them into songs."

When asked if there's any increased pressure for their forthcoming album after all the hype they've received, Jonny seems dismissive and aloof. "I guess. I mean, maybe for the other people on our team, for the booking agents and those people, there's more pressure. But I try not to pay attention to reviews."

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