

Pop & Hiss

The L.A. Times music blog

« [Coachella preview: Gang Gang Dance](#) | [Main](#) | [Michel Gondry, Jon Brion spread the sunshine on stage \(and get the 'Knives Out' too\)](#) »

Crystal Antlers rolls with the punches

05:15 PMPT, Apr 15 2009

The band's 'Tentacles' album has arrived, but its label, Touch and Go, has problems. Fortunately, the Long Beach band is self-sufficient.

Long Beach-based Crystal Antlers has, since its inception in 2006, stuck to the do-it-yourself model that punk bands honed in the 1980s. The sextet -- singer and bassist Jonny Bell, guitarists Errol Davis and Andrew King, organist Victor Rodriguez-Guerrero, drummer Kevin Stuart and multi-instrumentalist Damian Edwards (an L.A. cult hero known as "Sexual Chocolate") -- made its own CD packaging, screen-printed its own T-shirts and toured the country constantly.



Even after Pitchfork, the dominant website of the indie music world, gave Crystal Antlers' self-released EP a stellar review and a "Best New Music" tag in June 2008, most of the people who turned up to see the band's raging psychedelic rock in concert had discovered the group through record stores or from human-to-human word of mouth.

"We'd never heard of Pitchfork until they did the review of us," conceded Bell, speaking from a pay phone in Geneva during the group's first European tour.

Eventually, though, the hassles of running the band began to interfere with actually making music, and the members opted to sign with Chicago's Touch and Go Records, a respected independent label that had handled such subterranean heroes as TV on the Radio, the Jesus Lizard and Big Black. Then Crystal Antlers, a band that built its following using a 20th century approach, ran into a 21st century problem.

Two months ago, Touch and Go laid off its staff, shut down its distribution arm and indicated that it would not be making any additions to its release schedule in the coming weeks and months. The label's owner, Corey Rusk, declined to be interviewed for this article, but the economic downturn and the generally dismal state of the recording industry presumably are behind the drastic measures.

Still, Crystal Antlers' album "Tentacles" arrived in stores through Touch and Go last week, and it seems entirely possible that this will be the last new band on the label for a while, maybe forever. "I don't know what to think about that," Bell said with resigned laugh.

It's a turbulent time for musicians, and neither major nor indie labels can offer any guarantees that they'll be able to sell artists' work, or even keep the lights on. Crystal Antlers' story only reinforces how important it is these days for a band to be as self-sufficient as possible.

"We did everything on our own for so long, it was big deal for us to commit to a label," Bell said. "We really trusted [Touch and Go], and they've been the best up until this point. It's so sad for the whole music industry that a label that has been so ethical and has had so many great bands for such a long time is calling it quits."

"Tentacles" was recorded in San Francisco in December over the course of a largely sleepless week, a period when, Bell said, he never left the studio for more than 15 minutes at a time and did most of his vocals in the late evening or early morning hours. These severe conditions inspired the wide-eyed desperation that characterizes the band's songs.

"There's a certain point you hit in the middle of the night where you get this moment of clarity," Bell said. "You try to force yourself into a trance with it. That usually happens to me at 3 o'clock in the morning."

The album feels bleary and paranoid, with a slipper hold on reality. Beginning with the spiraling instrumental "Painless Sleep," it descends into frenzied guitars and personal doom. On "Time Erased," Bell howls, "Now it's too late to find our way back home" before evoking decay and dilated eyes. The song climaxes in feedback and wind chimes that at first sound like breaking glass.

But there is a vitality lurking in "Tentacles." For the first half of the song "Memorized," Stuart's drums pummel as Bell sings about the betrayals of time, then the bridge abruptly ascends with drawn-out "ooohs" and brass horns.

"There's emotion in their music. They have an 'uh!' to their sound," said Sean Carlson, the Los Angeles promoter who has done many local shows with the band and brought them on most of his nationwide F Yeah

Tour last year.

The extreme circumstances of recording "Tentacles" also helped replicate the intensity that Crystal Antlers shows are known for. "You can tell we were working as hard as we could," Stuart said. "We only had a short amount of time and we knew we had to get it right. We couldn't overproduce it."

The band will play a release party for "Tentacles" today at Eagle Rock's Center for the Arts. The group is nearing the end of a rare three-week stretch back home -- though four California shows were scheduled during that break -- and the musicians expect to be on tour for most of 2009.

As for the situation with Touch and Go, the band's members were definitely caught off-guard and hadn't expected to be in search of a new label, but interested parties already have begun reaching out.

"We got e-mails even before it was announced, because people had heard was going on," Bell said.

Until that next deal is in place, they're doing things their old way -- packing their own gear into the van, selling their own merch and hoping that record store clerks keep telling customers about a band from Long Beach called Crystal Antlers.

"We're not freaking out because we know what it's like doing it yourself," Stuart said. "We've been in this situation before. I think we'll be all right."

-- Eric Ducker