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FEATURE

Planets & Stars

by Will Mason

Planets & Stars have the sort of band name that is seemingly designed to undermine the usefulness of search engines. Regardless of where someone interested in finding out more about the band places the quotation marks or which clause is rendered independent, any attempts to get Yahoo! or Google to cough up the official Planets & Stars website will likely meet with endless pages devoted to the joys of astronomy or poems by fifty-year-old burnouts. Fortunately, the band is part of a growing community on the web launched last March by the name of the Cropcircle Collective.



Born from discussions between groups of friends and collaborators originally based in Chicago, the collective is dedicated to supporting the various works of the members, with a website that stores information and contains song downloads from several bands and collaborative units, along with poetry and engaging articles. The two central figures of the Cropcircle Collective are singer/songwriter Dan Sweigert and poet/guitarist Frank "Weatherbone" Rutledge, who just released their debut EP Tyler under the Planets & Stars moniker.

The collective and its label, Audible Cropcircle, came about after these music school colleagues decided it would be best to pool their efforts. As Sweigert explains, "I'd collaborated with some of these people for over ten years. We all decided it would be a good idea to combine our efforts in what we would call a collective. It was basically that we would put out CDs of our various projects, and I would create this website. It would

all focus around the idea of the label, Frank's poetry, and so forth. We just had so many projects we thought that might be a better way to go."

Planets & Stars' debut EP is a mix of Brazilian-influenced jazz, indie-rock, ambient sound, and references to literature and culture. The album's title is a reference to the character Tyler Durden from Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and the novel's popular film adaptation. The underground society of Palahniuk's story was clearly an additional influence on the title track and in Sweigert's thoughts while he wrote the lyrics to the album.

"People want a sense of community, sometimes almost a cult," says Sweigert. "It makes me think of Cropcircle, it's almost the same idea. You want to have a community of people, a place where they can go and there's always something new up there that they can get into."

Rather than taking a more obviously appropriate, hardcore-influenced approach to this sort of socially conscious subject matter, the song "Tyler" starts off with an acoustic feel before building to a more rocked out second half. Sweigert says this was deliberate.

"Some of my earlier bands, I would just scream, and it does get kind of tiring. By the time I got to this stuff, I was in a different place," Sweigert admits. "Things are a little more on the surface, more blatant when you're younger. The Planets & Stars perspective is more turning inwards and has more of an element of storytelling. There's a different kind of growth, a little less 'woe is me.'"



"The Voice Before the Voice" is an instrumental track augmented by sounds of children and water. The piece grew from Sweigert's memories of vacationing on Jekyll Island, Georgia, while growing up, as well as his experiences at his current residence near Hilton Head, South Carolina. "The first times we started coming to Hilton Head, we'd be staying at some hotel and they'd have these extravagant bar swimming pools that were closed for the winter. There was this one lonely guy sitting there playing guitar by himself. Frank would always be playing these chord progressions he was working on, and I kept imaging how cool it would be to see him in that spot."

"I recorded the people at a swimming pool near where we live. Everyone was really cool about it and stayed away from the mic so it sounded really natural. The sounds of the pool and the sound of Frank playing guitar, that was basically it for that piece."

Rutledge gave this instrumental its ironic title, explaining that "A Voice Before the Voice" is the voice of intuition and inspiration. This "voice" is in fact the vocalization of a jazz instrument, a Charlie Parker-style improvised melodic phrase. "It is the non-verbal voice I listen for and then translate with my guitar into six-string poetry, and so out comes a tone poem like 'A Voice Before the Voice,'" says Sweigert.

Sweigert moved to South Carolina last Summer, in part to help fulfill a lifelong desire for a fruit orchard, which needless to say is not an easy dream to fulfill amidst Chicago's fierce winters. He's still able to work with Rutledge and the others long-distance, however. "I still work with Dan [Sweigert's collaborator from Cropcircle project] and

Frank. We're still collaborating, mostly through the mail now. Dan went out and bought a digital recorder when I moved. He's a singer, too, and he'll send me songs he's working on."

Tyler winds up its brief running time with Arctic Circle, a seven-minute jazzy opus. "It's a song about trying to live in the moment," explains Sweigert. "When you've had bad things happen to you, when things are good, you're still waiting for the next hammer to fall. In a way, I was kind of talking to myself in that song. In the Arctic Circle, it can be dark for a long time. When those good moments are so few and far between, you have to learn to appreciate when things are good."

Upon completion of Planets & Stars's debut EP, Sweigert and Rutledge are planning the future of Planets & Stars, which includes plans to record again later this year. Rutledge claims: "The Tyler EP is a sort of calling card to the music world. The hope is to continue creating the full length CD, the working title being Paper Airplanes for Plastic Animals."



The material for Planets & Stars is a true collaboration between Sweigert and Rutledge. As Sweigert describes the relationship, "Frank might come up with the basic chord progression, or sometimes I will. The songwriting is pretty close to 50-50. I attempt to come up with the lyrics because I'm doing the vocals. I'll come up with the melody and the concept will come out of that. Although Frank is a really wonderful poet and [the Collective] gets a really great response to his work, he hasn't really been writing the lyrics."

Rutledge describes the artistic differences between creating poetry and music in an appropriately "poetic" fashion: "Music is a duck that quacks," Rutledge proclaims. "Poetry is a duck in a cave, above the roaring sea, choking on the last few mouthfuls of an orchestra that only knows the score to a Bartok symphony backwards. The appreciation of poetry is an exercise in attention: attention to the moment, to the meaning and the music of words, preferably spoken aloud. With an attentive focus the appreciation grows slowly and develops over time. Music is immediate. What is more in the moment than the drum's pounding rhythm, more immediate than a wall of distorted guitars and a screaming vocalist? Music is as primal as a heartbeat, affecting every living human being with a mind open enough to listen and enjoy."

Being spread out across the country makes live dates somewhat difficult for the current Planets & Stars line-up. However, Sweigert has tentative plans to perform Planets & Stars material when touring as 9 on Bali. Radio performances have also been discussed as an option for playing the material live. Meanwhile, the web site continues to help spread the word about Planets & Stars and the other Cropcircle bands as well. "If we have material that doesn't fit the album or maybe a remix, we'll put it up on the Cropcircle site as the free downloadable song of the month," says Sweigert. "It's not something that ever appears on the record. The only way to get it is to go to the site and download it. Every month is something different."

The idea behind the Collective is largely promotional in getting the group's creative work heard and seen by the potentially appreciative, but no one involved would even be doing this if it weren't fun and satisfying in and of itself. "The guys that create real crop circles are putting something out there and seeing how people react to it," says Sweigert. "That's the idea behind the site: you're kind of creating a little miracle. Of course, there's some bullshit behind actual crop circles. That influences some of the text pieces on the site."

The Cropcircle Collective continues to evolve as an organization and creative force. As Rutledge puts it, "Cropcircle Collective is a virtual artists' commune, an imaginary neighborhood where the participant's creative work seemingly appears mysteriously overnight, like a crop circle in a farmer's field. For us, the 'farmer's field' is the observer or listener's mind and taste in the arts. I would like to see it grow and represent many art forms, from music to painting to digital films and literature."

www.cropcirclecollective.com