

HORSE the band

Nathan Winneke- Vocals • David Isen – Guitar • Erik Engstrom – Keyboards • Daniel Pouliot - Drums

HORSE the band teeter on the brink of brilliance, total ruin and extinction. All day. Every day.

This mere fact of their existence is masterfully executed by and evidenced on their latest slab of artful noise, *Desperate Living*, (10/06/09, Vagrant) an album which is inspired by John Waters' film of the same name and the experiences the band has endured over the past several years in the eats-its-young music business. Rather than sack up and get in line as the next tasty meal to be devoured by the music business beast, HORSE the band decided to write their own rules regarding their career. It wasn't easy, but they learned a whole lot.

"We had been touring the same places for so long that what used to be a new adventure everyday was starting to blur into a continuous stream of boredom and self-destruction," said keyboardist Erik Engstrom. "Here is this great dream of your life and five years later, you've played to a lot of people and been everywhere in your country 28 times and are thinking, 'What have I done with my life?' We felt like the disillusioned, bad-attitude pariahs of the music industry. We ended up with a well-known reputation, partially deserved, for 'being crazy and wasted', 'not giving a shit,' and 'treating the wrong people with disrespect.' It seemed like all normal avenues were played out or closed to us. Any ideas we had that were outside of the box - to bring something new to the table - were disregarded as not part of the traditional business plan." Don't call the wah-imbalance just yet. Things got worse - a whole lot worse- for HTB.

Since the Southern California band's last album, *A Natural Death*, they tore through three drummers, three booking agents, two bassists, two domestic labels, a handful of international labels and were nearly sued by one of the major companies the band does business with. You do the math. Shit was sucking. "We were threatened to the very brink," Engstrom says soberly. "We didn't have any money. We went on the craziest world tour ever and came back with zero. We couldn't even be creative as a band because of all the member changes. We were always training new drummers and bass players instead of channeling our experiences into new music."

This 45-country tour of Earth - yes, Earth, where they visited far and away places like Wuhan, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, Ankara, Belgrade, Moscow and Minsk, places you normally only hear about on CNN or the Discovery Channel - that Engstrom speaks of was a self-financed and self-booked sojourn across the globe. No agent. No label. No tour publicist. No support. Ignoring the naysayers - so certain that HTB had no 'value' on foreign soil because of these factors - the band struggled ahead on their own. But this tour factored into the music you'll enjoy on *Desperate Living*.

"That tour was ultimately desperate living," Engstrom said. "Not sleeping for a week straight. Shitting in holes. Eating animal bones for food. Playing for 15 people one day and 5000 the next. You're not sure of your role in the world, not knowing what your life is about when you are shitting in a river and playing to 40 Chinese dudes in suits one night and then eating a stingray and drinking Red Bull and vodka in Singapore the next night." Yes, the band actually defecated in bodies of water. "When in Rome..." Engstrom said about their actions. "Other people do it, you've slept 10 hours in the last week, and it just makes sense... why wouldn't you?"

Against all odds, things seem to be looking up for Horse the band, who are currently signed to Vagrant Records... but that doesn't mean they're kowtowing to the establishment. They've just finally found a partner who appreciates their adventurous spirit to help them go the distance with a little support. After a treacherous series of business relationships, they looked to another left-of-center artisan, the pencil-mustachioed auteur John Waters, for some deeper inspiration. While the band is known for sampling films in its music, they didn't use any bytes from the film, a lesser-known, yet colorful, cult title in the director's repertoire about a woman who kills her husband then runs off with an obese maid.

"We didn't make references to the film, other than the title of the movie, so it's our own view on it," the keyboardist said. "The degradation portrayed in the movie used to make me feel empty for a few days after I watched it. Now it isn't even weird to me anymore. The album is a

throwback to the title of that movie and the idea of 'living at the top, when you're at the fucking bottom,' which has sort of become our mantra over the last eight years. Everyone is living totally desperately, grasping at straws, trying to 'just be happy!,' he laughs. whether it's getting the right job, finding a mate, buying a house, making money, looking cool, losing weight, being famous... It's all so desperate and so primitive. Everyone seeks the things that they believe they should value. The concept applies to our lives too, but in an even more dirty and disgusting way: go on tour to pay for the shitty apartment and get some sort of positive reinforcement from our audience. We're just as desperate as the guy in China bathing in the same river that someone is shitting in upstream."

Horse the band became citizens of the world on that 45-country tour but that hasn't hardened them to the point where they've lost their soul. Long dubbed "Nintendocore," because of the almost-cute, retro video game sounds in their music, they've expanded on the 8-bit sound that they pioneered and added an aching new-wave element, drawing on everything from Roxy Music to LA-based 80's action movie soundtracks.

Desperate Living has the blood of the musicians who created it coursing through its tainted veins. "Every song has its own character," Engstrom says. "Nathan could submit the lyrics to The New Yorker as poems or something. I think we seriously pushed him to the brink of insanity or suicide in the process of making this record, but the intensified pressure and nearly debilitating self-criticism paid off in the end. We also wouldn't have gotten anywhere near the sound we wanted if not for our producer, Noah Shain. We told him a bunch of vague adjectives about the raw and natural sound we wanted that ultimately ended with the 'the Yeah Yeah Yeahs if they were us' and then literally sat for weeks discussing and playing with sounds until we got it. The records sounds so true to the live feel of the band and I know it's because of Noah."

One of the crucial ways the band proves it's gotten over its tongue-in-cheek reputation is via Desperate Living's guest list, which features Jamie Stewart of Xiu Xiu handling some additional production work and sound design. Stewart helped make HTB songs feel visceral in a way the band hadn't previously approached. "Jamie is one of the only people out there experimenting with sound and actually getting non-traditional sounds to convey profound emotion. He is a true artist and I just wanted work with him as a huge admirer and see what he would do with our music. When we were writing we left a lot of room for non-linear parts, for the songs to come out of tempo and take a breath and go somewhere really damaged, then launch back into the traditional structure. It was really fulfilling to work with him."

Even more impressive is the appearance of Ukrainian classical pianist Valentina Lisitsa. "She plays a devastating piece on top of this surprise breakdown," Engstrom said, somewhat gushingly. "If you look it up (Prokofiev's Piano Concerto #2) on Wikipedia, it was written on the occasion of Prokofiev's best friend shooting himself in the face and it's also known as one of the hardest piano pieces to play ever written. She may be the best living pianist right now, and she recorded this piece along to our song on her Bosendorfer and broke a fucking string, exclusively for us."

So, that's where Horse the band are at in 2009. A little worse for wear, a whole lot worldlier and most importantly, letting life and art influence the noise they commit to tape. Without all the shit that went down in the past few years, Desperate Living wouldn't be quite so compelling. Let's see what else life throws at Horse the band. However they juggle it, one thing is sure. They'll channel it into some effed up, but totally mind-blowing music. After all, isn't that the entire purpose of art? To make life a little less desperate?

<http://www.myspace.com/horsetheband>

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