

Toe Jam to release new album

by Tony Van Dorston

If ToeJam's hard work pays off, a new album should be coming out early this Spring. The album has already been recorded at Gark Studios, but the band needs a label to release it on.

It's hard to tell what the album will be like after hearing the three-song demo tape excerpted from the album. The best of the three cuts is the Fishbone-influenced "Money." The influence of the Talking Heads was shown with the use of the direct quote, "living in a shotgun shack" from "Once In A Lifetime."

The upcoming album would nearly guarantee satisfaction if it includes the live favorites "Late Night TV" and "Chemical Waste."

I was originally unimpressed by Toe Jam back in 1988, when they used to be called The Toejammers. Their white-boy funk failed to inspire me, regardless of tasteful James Brown covers. But their talent combined with relentless gigging and practice has resulted in such a tight sound that I'm forced to admire their musicianship.

Amazing guitarist Karl Miller is currently leading Toe Jam into musically challenging territories beyond funk, while singer Eric Savage's violin playing links them to a tradition of diverse bands like Velvet Underground and Camper Van Beethoven.

The dependable rhythmic virtuosity of drummer Sam Hurlbut and bassist Hugh Lurie preserve the hot funk rhythms, and any other kind of beat they care to explore.

With the exception of their inability to think of a more appealing name than Toe Jam, the band shows every sign of creative growth, making their live shows more and more worth seeing.

From talking with Toe Jam, I was relieved to find a lack of self-consciousness that many bands reveal in their futile attempts to be unbearably cool. They merely showed an honest dedication to their music and the local music scene.

Me: What was the first official gig of The Toejammers?

Karl: Valli's pizza.

Eric: In our latest form, October 1988.

Me: What about Springfest '88?

Eric: We played three Springfests. . . We've only played one Springfest in our present form. The name of our band is now Toe Jam.

Me: When did you change it?

Eric: It's been in the process of changing in the last three or four months.

Karl: We just want to make

it perfectly clear that we're not trying to be the Toejammers anymore.

Me: Why Toe Jam? That's the stuff between your toes.

Sam: Proper noun.

Eric: The Toejammers was the name of the band before we were together in the form that we are. We just kind of carried that on, just because it was easiest. The name The Toejammers as a name for a band, seems like it's centering on a group of guys. To me I'd rather it sound like an entity.

Karl: And we tried to think of something better but we just couldn't.

Me: You've played a lot of gigs with Beat The Clock. Have they helped you get gigs you've played with them?

Sam: I guess I can answer that, because I do all the booking. No. (Laughter). We've played with them and we're friends with those guys, and we really like them. We definitely appreciate them. A lot of people like to badmouth them, but they're fucking talented.

Karl: An incredible band.

Eric: They're really great.

Hugh: I studied off and on with Jim Anton, their bass player.

Eric: That's how we kind of started getting to know them. Hugh took lessons from him.

Hugh: I still do stuff with him sometimes. Not as much as I used to.

Sam: They showed us that it's actually possible to go

"We're not trying to be The Toejammers anymore."

out and get gigs, to develop something of your own, go out and actually pursue music. As they reached certain goals and got certain gigs, that spurred us on to go ahead. They made a record, we made a record, it's kind of following suit.

Eric: Not necessarily. I don't see them as following suit. They are our closest friends that have done all this stuff. We definitely did it on our own and not because they did it. I don't think they influenced us musically as much as they have business-wise, showing us how to do it.

Me: And your album's all recorded?

Sam: The album is done, and right now we're shopping it, which means I'm on the phone constantly calling little dinky labels and big hairy-ass labels.

Me: You're sending your presskit?

Sam: Yep, as small and impromptu as it is, they like to see a couple pictures of the band primarily. That's what they're looking for. Major labels don't give a shit about the local press at all.

They like national things.

Me: You were trying for major labels too?

Sam: Yeah, we are, we're letting them know what's going on, I don't perceive that happening now. Since the record is done what we'd like to ideally do is get an indie label to be interested in picking up the band and paying for the manufacture of this thing that we've done and sign us up for a future project, and what they do is they say five future projects.

Me: You recorded at Gark. Don't they have a label?

Sam: Yeah they do. If we don't find anything substantial like anybody who has any bucks or anything by the end of this month, then maybe a week into March we'll be releasing it on Gark records.

Eric: We're going to try to get fewer gigs this semester, to accommodate for stuff. Practice more. Last semester we played so many gigs it was hard to be motivated to practice a whole lot. But we've been practicing a whole lot this January.

Me: You practice almost every day?

Eric: Yeah, we've got a bunch of new stuff coming out. Some of it sounds really good, some of it needs work. I think it will be cool.

Me: How would you describe any of your new stuff that would be different from your older music?

Eric: We have one new tune which is a very hard-driving tune still with a funk backbeat. There's also a brush-shuffle beat tune. We don't really have control over where we want to move. We can't decide, "oh we're going to move in a certain direction and then move that way." Ideally we'd like to explore a wide variety beyond funk.

Karl: Yes, I would definitely like to explore more.

Me: Do you have any ideas?

Karl: I don't have any particular ideas, but I've been listening to a lot of noise and feedback guitar a lot, like Sonic Youth, Glenn Branca and that sort of stuff.

Sam: People have called us kind of jazz/funk.

Me: After playing a while, are you able to improvise a lot onstage?

Karl: Quite a bit. That's one of my favorite parts of it. If we could move more in that direction that would be a really good thing. To be able to improvise within songs and from song to song. To be able to . . .

Eric: Have a lot of flexibility within a song.

Karl: To create different parts each time we play them.

Eric: And have them all sound good. (Laughter).

Sam: We definitely do it a lot more than we used to,

just because it's a matter of being relaxed.

Me: I was asking about that because at least at Macalester it seems to be divided into people who are into the rock'n'roll and musicianship and they think other people listen to Toe Jam just to dance. Do you want to get more of an image of just being good musicians playing good music?

Karl: Hopefully. That'd be great.

Eric: It's weird to be a musician at Macalester, because the music is so strong there and the band scene is so strong there and so many people are playing around, and playing good music. There are a lot of good bands like Walt Mink, Gneissmaker.

Karl: There's lots of great bands there.

Eric: I think that creates a tendency for people to categorize and rank bands.

Me: People talk of competition that I'm not sure exists.

Eric: We definitely at times have felt that competition. But I think I speak for the group when I say we're far enough removed from the Macalester scene that it's not a really big issue right now, like how other musicians or how other people want to categorize. I'm really proud of having come out of Macalester because there's so many cool bands.

[We groove to Funkadelic's "Maggot Brain."]

Hugh: It's true about the bad feelings at Macalester. The sad thing is that we haven't really broken into the local scene, you know? Supposedly we're doing better than other people.

Karl: Music shouldn't be a competitive thing, especially when there isn't any money involved. In the Mac music scene it's not like you're competing for anything other than just stature and shit, and that's ridiculous.

Me: It doesn't seem like it's very easy for these bands

that are coming out of the college to get into labels.

Eric: It's true, it's really true. People really have an attitude about college bands. Snot-nosed little college brats.

Me: If they come from a college they don't seem real to some people.

Sam: As someone booking the band, I hear weird little backlashes from some bar owners. They know you're a Macalester band or Carlton band, and suddenly you're categorized beyond the music.

Me: Where do you like playing most?

Sam: Uptown.

Me: Is that the only place you like to play?

Eric: No, 400 Bar, Macalester.

Karl: Cochran was great! [We discuss the decline in Cochran and Kirk Basement shows,

Karl: That's the thing, Macalester for it's size has tons of music.

Me: It'd be better if they'd get to play more.

Eric: I'd just love the whole Mac thing to benefit the bands. That'd be great if they could get us some sort of reputation.

Me: You had often done benefits for Pro Life and stuff. I meant Pro Choice, not Pro-Life.

Eric: I thought you said Pro Choice I wasn't even listening carefully. You say Pro-Life and I'm like, yep, yep. We'd been watching T.V. and we go yep, yep, yep, yep.

Me: Does your political views reflect in your music much?

Sam: Yeah. Eric: Yeah, the lyrics.

Sam: It's weird, we can't sing ooh yeah baby I want to take you home tonight.

Karl: Not that I would want to.

Eric: When we're all alone that's actually what we sing about, ooh yeah, boy meets girl, boy gets girl songs.

Karl: I think that is possibly the worst thing about rock music these days is the lyrics center around such a small, small area. So if we could escape that in any way that would be much better.

Me: Any other subject matter seems kind of taboo. 'Aw you're a political band.'

Sam: And that's another thing they can latch onto their little labels, but that's what they have to do I guess.

[Hugh and Sam reminisce over the long-past big shows at Cochran when a room in the back called the Copacabana served incredible amounts of hard liquor.]

Hugh: It was incredible, you'd go into a dark room and sit down on comfortable chairs.

Eric: Oh my God. We wanna know what happened to that.

