

Louder than bombs

Canadian band makes the political personal in sophomore album

V MUSIC

BY AILEEN TORRES

Handsome Furs may sound like a gimmicky name, but this band does have some meaningful messages to impart.

The Montreal-based husband-and-wife duo Dan Boeckner and Alexei Perry are coming out with their second release, "Face Control," on Sub Pop Records Mar. 10. The catchy songs are a mixture of upbeat and aggressive pop, rock, and electronica. The guitars are louder than in their first album, "Plague Park," the tempos faster, and the percussion's been stepped up, too. Whereas "Plague Park" sounds slower and more melancholy, with lyrics about isolation and defeatism, "Face Control" has a raucous energy. There's so much enthusiasm in the music that the lyrics kind of catch you off guard. These are songs about contemporary life's weighty issues, such as disconnection and a deep longing for community. There's a sense here that, even though the world is a cold place, desire lives on, and the depth of that yearning is what gives people hope. Or, as Boeckner sings in a song of the same name, "All we want, baby, is everything."

Post-communist Eastern Europe was the inspiration for the themes of the album. When the band toured there, they were struck by the persistence and resilience of the locals. They talked especially with "the older people who had lived through communism and were secretly, illegally importing bands into these countries and running clubs with no money and building all their equipment themselves. This sort of tenacious attachment to promoting music, whether it's gonna make money or not, was really inspiring," says Boeckner.

He and Perry began writing the songs for "Face Control" during that tour, and when they returned home, they were also influenced by the political happenings in North America at the time. Boeckner thought a lot about the last days of the George W. Bush administration and the ruling administration in Canada, headed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, which "was fairly right-wing. There was a coalition government forming and then Harper vetoed it and suspended [Parliament]. That was right when

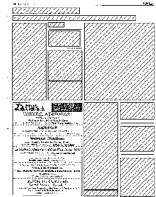
we were finishing the record. That really pushed everything forward," says Boeckner.

Although the couple is politically conscious, they don't want to hit audiences over the head with their opinions. Boeckner has never liked "preachy" bands, but neither does he like the messages of today's popular indie rock bands, who are "basically talking about, like, these Dungeons and Dragons metaphors. And everybody gets it—it's about girls, right? [It's a] classic rock trope, or music trope. The popular metaphor to wrap that in is like, 'the king rode down with his horsemen,' and then you play something that sounds like bleached-out '60s Eagles stuff. Who is that speaking to when the entire North America in the late 2000s was on the verge of a giant economic collapse? Is it just that college kids are so insulated from the rest of the world?"

A band that made it a point not to isolate itself from the rest of the world is The Clash, whom Boeckner admires. "In Thatcher-era London, when things were getting economically really bad, you had bands like The Clash. They were saying something. It was something you could attach to. They were at least relaying what they were seeing around them globally and locally," he says.

By spending time with people in Eastern Europe apart from merely playing shows, he and Perry had their own eyes opened to history. They heard plenty of stories from the communist days, when everything had to be done by hand and on one's own. The DIY tradition, which Boeckner knows well as a former punk rocker, is still strong in these countries. While playing at a club in Latvia, he met a man who built his own equipment: guitar amps, monitors, compressors—basically the entire sound system for the club. He quickly fixed Boeckner's equipment whenever anything went wrong. That level of self-sufficiency made an impression on the guitarist.

He also met staff members of a Serbian guerilla radio station called B92 that was anti-Milosevic in the late '90s into 2000 and, hence, persecuted by the government. "People disappeared, people were arrested, the station was shut down. They were really instrumental



in getting these protests in Belgrade going," says Boeckner. Also, they broadcasted "news from Serbia that was accurate out to foreign radio stations. They were one of the first people to record real audio files and then stream them out to other stations, which would then be picked up by or given to, like, the BBC or Voice of America." There is a hint of this station in the song "Radio Kalininbrad": "My home on the other side/...Radio Kalininbrad/Static on a broken wire."

"One of the most rewarding things I've ever gotten to do playing music is to meet these people and exchange stories. It's emotionally rewarding. It goes beyond just getting on stage and putting on a good show," says Boeckner.

In the two years that the band has been in existence, Handsome Furs has been very productive. They've put out an album a year, and they've already got six songs for the next album. There's also Boeckner's other band, Wolf Parade, to consider. He and the boys will get together in October to work on their third album. But before that, it's just him and his wife on the road.

For more on Handsome Furs, check out subpop.com/artists/handsome_furs.

HANDSOME FURS

Fri., Mar. 6 at 11 p.m.

Mercury Lounge

217 E. Houston Street

\$15; 212-260-4700; mercuryloungenyc.com

'One of the most rewarding things I've ever gotten to do playing music is to meet these people and exchange stories.'

Dan Boeckner



Photo by Liam Maloney

Handsome couple Dan Boeckner and Alexei Perry are about to release their second album of pop, rock and electronica music.

Printing imperfections present during scanning