

STREET SCENE

Funny Atomic Numbers ready to play the big crowds

Late last year The Atomic Numbers learned about the harsh reality of the rock music world.

Accustomed to playing small clubs throughout the Midwest, the Hamtramck-based band got the opportunity to open for The Verve Pipe in Illinois and Wisconsin.

"We were playing 1,800 to 1,800-seat places; big real rock shows. Those shows were obviously a turning point for us. It gave us a lot of confidence. We knew you could plow us down in front of a large audience and we knew we could pull it off. We knew our music could fill up a big place," said drummer Matt Aljian, a 1985 graduate of Southeastern High School in Birmingham.

"We got to play rock stars for two dates. Then reality slammed us in the face the very next weekend when we had three shows in Chicago in just little crappy clubs with no PA's and the horrible schlepping of gear with our trailer. It was a cruel joke that got played on us by the rock 'n' roll gods," he added with a laugh.



Pop returns: The Atomic Numbers - from left, bassist Jeff Hupp, vocalist/guitarist/pianist Tim McHugh, guitarist Zack Shipp and drummer Matt Aljian - brings its hook-laden pop sounds to the Viper Room in Detroit on Friday, May 1.

Snappy comments are par for the course of The Atomic Numbers, the self-proclaimed "funniest band."

"I've never been in a band that's laughed so hard and has as much fun. We've hung out

with a lot of bands and none of them laugh as much as we do. If we didn't have so much fun we'd be in trouble. All bands have their tensions and their problems and we're not immune to that," explained Aljian, a former

member of the Hannibala. "We laugh so much at each other that it kind of helps us move along. We feel blessed in that way."

The band members - vocalist/guitarist/pianist Tim McHugh, guitarist Zack Shipp, formerly of the Lollipop Guild - crack each other so much that they're considering a comedy album. "We'll have hilarious skits and scenarios and stuff. We keep talking about it. If we ever get any money, I swear to God we'd do a comedy album."

Perhaps The Atomic Numbers' fun-loving attitude helped provide the band with its relentlessly hook-laden melodies on its debut "Flying Machine EP." After all, a positive work environment yields quality work.

The EP kicks off with the 2:59 "Thirty Seconds or Less." Filled with lush harmonies and a tension-building second verse, the song sticks with the listener like molasses long after it is finished. "So Cool" shares the band's love of the Brit pop band Blur. Hand claps fill the shimmering "New

Cliches."

Since the album, recorded in April and June 1997 at Premier Sound Studios in Farmington Hills, was released in August it has been met with nothing but good reviews. Fluxnet Reviews of New York said "Michigan club-goers must be getting a first-hand look at the next big thing."

The Atomic Numbers is awaiting that elusive "big break" but Aljian said he feels that will soon come.

"The story with The Atomic Numbers so far is it's had a lot of small breaks, incremental advancement. We haven't had the big break yet, but a lot of good things have happened. It's been a struggle."

One struggle has been how to break into radio airwaves inundated with mundane middle-of-the-road rock acts.

"There's a lot of different genres kind of going on. You have hum and strum top 40 Midwestern rock bands or you have a lot of the Creeds or bands like that who pretty much have picked up on the post-grunge tip and run with it," he explained.

"Where does that leave pop

bands like us? I'm looking at the cover of Rolling Stone from April with (the singer from) The Verve on the cover and it says 'The return of rock 'n' roll.' That looks well for The Atomic Numbers. Five months ago it said rock 'n' roll is dead, electronica is here."

To Aljian, pop doesn't mean "popular." It's about the hook and it doesn't necessarily have to be up all the time.

"It can be about some super heavy stuff done in a crafty way. It can explore heavier themes. Hell, look at Morrissey. The Smiths were pop. It's all about good songwriting and melodies and I would tend to think not-so-mundane lyrics."

It helps to have a sense of humor as well.

The Atomic Numbers perform along with the Detroitans, Immortal Wins of Soul and Watershed, on Friday, May 1, at the Viper Room, 17320 Harper Road, in Detroit. Cover charge is \$5 for the 21 and older show. For more information, call (313) 881-3611. Visit <http://www.atomicnumbers.com> to learn more about the band.

Public TV auction is a win-win proposition



ANN DELISI

And even though it bumps *Backstage Pass* off the air this week, it's easy for me to get excited about the Auction; ultimately, it helps programs like *Backstage Pass*. I even hope to help out this weekend as an auctioneer. So while normally this column would preview what's happening on *Backstage Pass* and around the town, it makes sense that this week we should give you the scoop on the Auction.

If you've never watched the Auction, brace yourself for a fast-paced treat. The event is a rare win-win-win situation. Win One: Vendors donate items, resulting in some on-air promotion and a deduction come tax time. Win Two: Viewers get great deals on items, and can feel good that the money goes to support Win Three: resources that help Detroit Public Television to continue broadcasting such PBS programs as *Sesame Street*, *Masterpiece Theatre*, and *News*, and local programs such as *American Black Journal*, *Back to Back* and, of course, *Backstage Pass*.

If you've been watching the Auction for years, you've probably noticed a new look this time around. The flashing lights and shiny surfaces are gone, replaced by natural wood finishes and earth tones. Florence Henderson would feel right at home! (Just remember: no line dancing allowed!)

It's the auction's 30th Anniversary, and it's better than ever. The six-day televised event offers high bidders a huge variety of donated merchandise - over 4,000 items in all. For the first time in its history, the Auction will feature antiques from Knightsbridge Antiques and Collectibles, with items like a Victorian bedroom set, a grandfather's clock, 1960's Pop art "Bye" by C. Moore, and Madame Alexander Collectible Dolls.

For the last several years, wine has been a popular item, so there's more wine than ever. Travel has become so popular that it has its own board - a regular place in the Auction cycle. Every year, people get some amazing deals on fabulous trips. Some travel highlights available this year are a family Disney-world vacation at the Royal Plaza, a one-week condo stay in Kauai, Hawaii, and trips to Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., Bahamas, Grand Cayman, Las Vegas, Traverse City, and Glen Arbor, just to name a few.

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Some Detroit area merchant groups have donated shopping sprees, there's a truly unique Titanic Gift package, a wedding album package, a jobabum of Dom Perignon, and of course a bevy of great gift certificates. There really is something for everyone.

With 30 years behind it, the whole tangle runs with smooth efficiency. A great staff of volunteers answers phones, taking bids from anywhere off the DPTV premises. The DPTV crew worked very hard tearing down standing program sets (including the set for *Backstage Pass*) to

transform the studio into an Auction house. Talent from all over the city donate their time as auctioneers. They even have a system in place that gives people who register a personal express bid number, to give them a jump on fellow bidders.

If you're a merchant who was unaware of the Auction opportunity, it's never too late to donate or participate. All the information anyone needs is available at the Detroit Public TV web site at www.wtvs.org, or call the station. *Backstage Pass* will be back next Thursday, May 7, repeated Friday, May 8. In the meantime, be sure to tune in, bid high, and bid fast!



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