

Music: Feature

New 97's

Acclaimed band gets an indie makeover

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INDIE DOES IT: Old 97's

It used to be simple for bands. Play shows, sign with a major label, get a hit single, make lots of money. When the band lost its record contract, it resorted to playing shows on cruise ships and at state fairs. Not so anymore. Artists, who often feel like Cinderella to the major labels' wicked stepmother, have realized that if they go to a smaller label, they not only gain artistic freedom, but they sometimes make more money, even if they sell fewer albums.

The latest example of that trend is the Old 97's. After developing a following for their insurgent brand of country on Bloodshot Records, the band signed with Elektra. The guys polished up their sound and consistently sold between 100,000-150,000 albums for their three critically acclaimed releases. When the band's 2001 release, *Satellite Rides*, failed to break 150,000, they were unceremoniously dropped.

After a two-year hiatus, during which lead singer Rhett Miller released the solo CD *The Instigator*, the band signed with upstart label New West. With acts such as Drive-By Truckers and the Flatlanders, the label is clearly a better fit for the Old 97's alternative country sound than Elektra. The band's latest release, *Drag It Up*, has a looser, sometimes psychedelic sound to it. Miller credits the change to the band's new label. "There's something liberating about being on New West, just being back together again after our break," says Miller.

The opening cut, "Won't Be Home," harks to the band's Bloodshot days with Ken Bethea's galloping guitars and Philip Peeples' driving drums. But most of the album is slower, inviting listeners to give it a few tries before

making a final decision. Lead songwriters Miller and bassist Murry Hammond even let Bethea play Ringo Starr to their Lennon/McCarthy by including his "Coahuila," a silly little ditty that, like Starr's "Octopus' Garden," is a song you find yourself singing hours later.

Although Miller, who recently negotiated out of his solo contract with Elektra, claims that the company never tinkered with the band's music, it is obvious upon listening that just being on a major label influenced the band to shoot for pop stardom. But even though the songs had less twang, Miller continued to pen intelligent, slightly self-deprecating tunes much in the vein of Paul Westerberg, if Westerberg had grown up in Dallas.

They got little help from Elektra, which Miller believes failed to market the band successfully. He cites an experience in which the band was in a meeting with Elektra department heads who told them that the company was not going to produce a video for their CD, even though it was in the band's contract. "Ken [Bethea] said, 'Man, you're gonna make a record for us, spend all this money and then not make a video? That's pussy.' Which actually didn't go over as badly as I thought. But I remember at the time looking over at all these female executives and thinking, 'Oh, God'."

Miller, who admits that all his songs sound like hits to him when he writes them, realizes that the band just doesn't fit the mold for what is considered popular today. He points to *Rolling Stone*, the sole mainstream magazine that consistently gives the band bad reviews. "The bad review I got for my solo record had Christina Aguilera on the cover," he remembers, "and on the *Drag It Up* review, it was Lindsay Lohan or something, and I'm like, 'well, if these are the people you're holding up as the pillars of our artistic community, then I'm glad you hate me because you're fucking idiots.'"

But Miller is too much of a nice guy to let it end on such a sour note. "At the same time, I'm not complaining," he says. "I've got a nice house and I'm able to support a wife and a kid. I feel pretty good about it all."