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St. Louis' Keokuk Delivers Delightfully Off-Kilter Rock & Roll with Its Self-Titled Debut

Christian Schaeffer

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When Curtis Hendricks was singing and playing guitar in Plaid Cattle during the early and mid 1990s, the musical landscape was a different place. That hard-charging three-piece mixed some of grunge's bristle and fuzz with Hendricks' sandpaper delivery and played such dear-departed haunts as

Mississippi Nights and the old Cicero's Basement Bar.

Some 25 years later, as the lead singer of Keokuk, Hendricks doesn't get tripped up in nostalgia but notes some key differences in the experience of promoting a local band. "It's really hard to get people to know of you," Hendricks says. "It seemed like it was easier back in the Plaid Cattle era because there weren't as many venues."

And the seeming ease of online media and social platforms isn't exactly a boon for a band whose core membership is well into middle age.

"The problem is that I am awkward as hell at manipulating those things," he says, laughing, of social media. "You gotta have a fan base or a friend base who knows about [your band]."

Luckily, the mechanics of playing music haven't changed too drastically in that time, and Hendricks and his bandmates make a distinct sound by pairing brusque, sharp-cornered rock with wild-card elements like tenor saxophone, loops and the occasional feedback squall.

Keokuk is making its recording debut with this self-titled, seven-song EP, but these players began to coalesce a little over four years ago. Hendricks and drummer Andrea Spencer had played together in the Pelvic Girdles about a decade ago, and Hendricks later paired up with saxophonist Dominic Schaeffer (no relation to the author) in an instrumental project called Psychotronics. So while playing music with his bandmates may be old hat, this is Hendricks' first time as the sole frontman.

"In a way it hasn't changed much, but this is the first band I've been the only singer and only songwriter. It's making me have to be a stronger singer," Hendricks says of his process. "I'm more interested in bringing a frame of a song and have the band flesh it out. I'm kind of a noodle writer — I just noodle around for something that has enough of a melody or a hook that sticks. When you bring it to the band, sometimes it hits right away."

Most of these songs stem from Hendricks' oft-abrupt guitar playing and wry lyrics. He says his vision was to cut much of the fat from the standard rock-song architecture and leave plenty of room. "I like linear playing," he says. "I play rhythm real percussively."

Keokuk, named for Spencer's south-city street where the band rehearses, rose from the ashes of another project between the guitarist and drummer and continues their musical partnership. Initially it was just a way to blow off steam and play a few covers — Tom Petty, Neil Young — but Hendricks

began to form songs from the grist produced by errant chords and rhythms.

"Andrea and I had a history from Pelvic Girdles, so finally we started jamming as a two-piece in her living room," recalls Hendricks. "That was kind of unrewarding. I like to have a bass player to push off of. Her son Zane — he's nineteen now — was a bit of a bass player. He's got his mother's genes as far as a rhythm player."

Despite his age, Zane Spencer has asserted himself in the band. What began as a placeholder became a writing member of the band — Hendricks calls him "a quick study" — and more often than not, mother and son lock in and give a muscular foundation for these songs. His high-neck hop-scotching on "Close My Eyes" gives a buoyant ballast to Hendricks' most raucous solo and Schaeffer's echo-effected horn lines.

"I'd started playing that solo a little different, with that cacophonous ending," Hendricks says of "Close My Eyes." "Zane and Dominic are back there chopping away — it's like three birds in a tree, chirping away."

Schaeffer approaches his lines as a mix between a one-man horn section and a lead guitarist, often working in counterpoint to Hendricks' rangy, crackling rhythm guitar. On opening track "Step Over Here (Please)" he taps into the lower range of his tenor sax and channels a little of the skronky, vibrato-heavy tone of famed Tom Waits sideman Ralph Carney.

The band recorded these tracks with Jason McEntire at Sawhorse Studio, but they retain much of the group's no-frills approach to tone and production while allowing the songs to bloom and expand.

"The stuff we did was well-rehearsed; we did all that in two days except for the vocals," says Hendricks. "That's kind of what Dominic and I were doing in Psychotronics — when we played out, the most successful songs would be like a wedge that starts out small and gets bigger. We were trying to manage sound. I can't say that I'm good enough to get us there on my own, but we always try to build as we go along."

Keokuk Record Release Show

8 p.m. Friday, November 25. The Gaslight Theater, 358 North Boyle Avenue. \$5. 314-458-2978.

