Arts & Humanities

The Grateful Undead

Vampire Weekend is staking its claim as one of the hottest and most original bands around — and having a bloody good time.

By
Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA
|
Spring 2008



Illustration by Robert Davis, photography by Tanit Sakakini.

They've gone from playing mixers and the Battle of the Bands at Columbia to being the most talked about indie rock group in America. They are selling out clubs

from New York to Portland to Japan to the British Isles. And they're playing two of the most important rock festivals in the U.S. — the Coachella Music & Arts Festival in Indio, California, and the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in Manchester, Tennessee. They've even been on the cover of SPIN.

So how did Vampire Weekend, that college band with the intriguing name, go from beer-soaked Columbia gigs to Saturday Night Live, while leaving their angst-ridden contemporaries, with their droning, distorted guitars and stationary performing styles, banging at the back gate?

Part of it is their penchant for playing live. The traditional record industry, in which consumers go into a store and buy packaged recordings of their favorite artists, is crumbling in the face of digitization. For the past several years, Internet sales have swamped those of CDs, and even superstar bands like the Eagles have chosen to put out their music independently rather than re-sign with major labels. Bands that want to get noticed have to earn their audience the old-fashioned way: They have to hit the road. And right now, Vampire Weekend, which consists of guitarist and singer Ezra Koenig '06CC, keyboardist Rostam Batmanglij '06CC, bassist Chris Baio '07CC, and drummer Christopher Tomson '06CC, is playing for anyone who will listen. Then there's the band's sound, which is unlike any other on the scene today — a sophisticated combination of world-music beats, smart-alecky lyrics, and a calypso-infused, ska-pop sensibility that's fun and funky rather than anguished and gloomy. Whatever you want to call this stuff ("Grad Student World Music with Humor and a High Degree of Musicality" would be too long for the posters), it's getting airplay and making waves.

Vampire Weekend formed at Columbia in the autumn of 2005. Koenig and Baio were roommates, and according to Koenig, they kept bumping into Batmanglij and Tomson on campus, until finally they decided to start playing together. The mix of their musical backgrounds was tantalizing. In the summer of 2004, Koenig, an English lit major, traveled through India, picking up musical ideas along the way, and then toured the United States as a member of the band Dirty Projectors. Rostam Batmanglij had a key to the harpsichord room in Dodge Hall. Christopher Tomson, like Batmanglij, was a music major, and Baio, a Russian studies man, served for three years as the music director at WKCR. "I played a lot of different things, but got really deeply into hip-hop," Baio says. "I really consider myself to be a member of the rap-and-sampling generation. But that's all mixed up for me with rock and pop and world music, and I think there are a lot of people out there our age for whom

this mix is really natural."

By February 2007, Vampire Weekend, named after a never-produced low-budget movie whose trailer was scored by Koenig, started gigging everywhere it could, from Columbia mixers to Webster Hall in the East Village. They recorded a six-song EP that they sold at gigs; some of the songs ended up on the new CD, titled Vampire Weekend. In the spring of 2007, Chris Baio booked the band's first national tour. It generated so much buzz that the band started receiving offers from important labels such as XL Recordings, home to hugely successful groups like Radiohead and The White Stripes. Without so much as an audition, the band signed with XL in July and hit the road again, this time to even more spectacular results.

"Since we released the record on January 29, it's sold about 150,000 copies," says Vampire Weekend's publicist, Sonya Kolowrat. "The guys have been on Letterman, Saturday Night Live, and Jimmy Kimmel Live. Their video for the song 'A-Punk' is in rotation at VH1, Fuse, MTV, MTV2, and many others, with MTV being particularly interested, having named the guys 'Artists of the Week' not too long ago. YouTube has been tremendously important, too. The video for 'A-Punk' has been seen by around 2 million people."

Not bad for a group that doesn't fit neatly into any of the countless genres of the indie music market. Their mixture of world music, reggae, pop, rock, and classical is entirely their own — an effortless-sounding fusion rather than a labored, look-what-we-can-do mishmash.

"Our influences are pretty hard to pinpoint," says 23-year-old Koenig, the group's main songwriter. "For instance, I love The Kinks and The Beatles, but you wouldn't necessarily know that from listening to our songs. The love we feel for an artist doesn't always show up directly in our music. We also don't sound much like Talking Heads, but they are definitely the poster children for the sort of musical borrowing that we do and the sound we make. We love their approach of taking whatever they like and using it organically."

How to describe that sound? Let's listen to the record. There's a bit of Bob Marley's distressed-sheep bleat in Koenig's upper register when he sings the reggae-flavored "Mansard Roof" and a touch of Soweto swing by way of Paul Simon in the lilting "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa." That track would fit nicely in Simon's South Africa-–inspired Graceland and features the line "But this feels so unnatural/ Peter Gabriel,

too” — which holds myriad meanings for anyone who’s interested in the politics of musical borrowing. Is the narrator singing about feeling unnatural in foreign geographical terrain (Gabriel himself has been a keen explorer of indigenous music the world over), or in lifting music and motifs from another culture? Regardless, it’s a melodic enough song to get radio play, and poses self-aware questions about cultural dislocation that typical top-40 songs avoid. It also makes cheeky references to “the colors of Benetton” and other totems of preppiedom. Koenig says he likes the idea of commenting on society’s ills, but he doesn’t want “to hit anybody over the head with any ideas. These songs are not schematic; they’re sort of natural observations about things.” Other songs make musical references to the Caribbean diversions of The Kinks’ Ray Davies and the punkish first album of The Clash. Still, the record holds together nicely, sounding like a band that isn’t merely looking for a cohesive identity, but has really found one.

Koenig, who has been writing songs since he was a kid, speaks fondly of his time at Columbia, where the group first laid down its sound. “With technology the way it is, we were able to do some of our recording in dorm rooms and music rooms at school. It’s why this record didn’t cost a fortune to make.” Koenig also is remarkably insouciant when discussing the band’s quick rise to fame, not to mention its recent appearance on a certain legendary late-night television program.

“Yeah, the *Saturday Night Live* thing was really fun,” Koenig says. “It was great to be on a show that you’ve watched since you were little, especially seeing rehearsal and watching all of the madness going on around us that Saturday afternoon. The reason why it didn’t throw us too much is, you’re really only playing for about 150 people in the television studio. You can’t let yourself think about all the millions of people who are watching you at home; that would make you really nervous. Generally, that’s been our feeling about playing and the buzz and everything. We just go out each night and do what we’ve done for two years: play. If you keep focused on writing and playing, it’s not that big a deal.”

Like Koenig, bassist Chris Baio is laid-back, unpretentious, and eclectic in his musical tastes. How many guys under 25 do you know who worship the rapper Nas, think Public Enemy made “four perfect albums in a row,” and “really loves” Neil Young’s After the Gold Rush?

“One of the things I’ve been glad about, regarding this tour,” Baio says, “is that we’ve been able to get some writing done for the next record; that’s not always easy

on the road. Also, we're all starting to contribute to the songwriting, so that should help us keep things fresh, as well as democratic."

So far the road has been good to the band — not too bumpy, and not too long. "We're really only touring three to four weeks at a time, so we don't get burned out," Baio says, adding that the band will tour England and Scotland this summer. "Also, we're lucky enough to have a good following already, so we're mostly headlining and playing at clubs that hold 300–500 people. That's the best way to build your name."

Baio does get a bit swoony, however, when he talks about the occasional gigs where the band has been the support act for artists he especially admires.

"Last August, we opened for Animal Collective," he says, his voice brightening, "and not too long ago we did four shows with The Shins. That really was such an honor. The way those guys have run their careers has been really smart and instructive, building things slowly, letting their music speak for them. Also, we're indebted to R.E.M. for supplying a great model to younger bands. They played anywhere and everywhere and built up a loyal fan base before they even started having hit records."

Baio also thinks performing on the road is important because it separates the musicians from the studio-created wannabes.

"Now that the teen pop thing is over, I think we're getting back to the idea of bands playing live in front of an audience. It doesn't matter what sort of music you play, interacting with an audience is essential to music — period. It really separates the musicians from the Britney Spearses of the world."

Read more from ***Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Peter Gerstenzang '82GS, '85SOA***