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Adam Levy cues the strings

Article by: CHRIS RIEMENSCHNEIDER, Star Tribune | Updated: October 22, 2013 - 3:49 PM

The Honeydogs frontman combined orchestral arrangements, rock songs and teaching in his new band And the Professors.



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Breaking with tradition from nearly every other interview in the history of rock 'n' roll, Adam Levy wants it known that his new strings-driven band And the Professors is not very cool or trendy.

"It really grew out of all the old classical and jazz music and movie scores I've been listening to for a long time, and not from what other modern bands are doing right now," Levy said.

It's a sound distinction. Given Levy's rocking reputation as the leader of the Honeydogs, his latest project could easily be compared to current (and Current) indie-rock gods such as Arcade Fire, the National and Sufjan Stevens, or to such Twin Cities favorites as Cloud Cult, Jeremy Messersmith and John Mark Nelson — all of whom feature strings on their albums.

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Bravo to all those acts, Levy said, but he's justified in distinguishing And the Professors as no bandwagon-jumping project.

The new 10-member ensemble — which convenes again Thursday at the Cedar Cultural Center to trumpet its debut album —

actually started as a school project when Levy was teaching at the Institute of Production and Recording (IPR) in 2010. Hence the collegiate band name.

Levy is not new to string arrangements, either. He incorporated them onto Honeydogs albums before it was cool. "I've been casually stealing chord changes from Randy Newman, Bernstein, Mendelssohn and composers like that in my rock songs for years," he admitted.

These new songs were actually built around the string arrangements, not the other way around, with some reputable orchestrators and composers leading the way.

"The strings here were fleshed out early on," noted Rebecca Arons, the cellist who became Levy's chief co-Professor. "He didn't just invite in some string players at the end to pad the recordings."

A member of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra, Arons connected Levy with big-wig local arrangers. Two of the songs were arranged by Robert Elhai, who has orchestrated scores of Hollywood scores, ranging from "The Sixth Sense" to "Iron Man 3." Two more were helmed by Children's Theatre music director Victor Zupanc. Arons also helped recruit Adi Yeshaya, who has arranged for Burt Bacharach and has recently been working with Arons on [Prince](#) recordings at Paisley Park.

"We called in a lot of favors," is how Levy put it.

That also refers to the musicians he lined up as performers. Three members of the opera orchestra round out the string section (Susan Janda, Conor O'Brien, Margaret Humphrey). The group also features harmony vocals from singer/songwriters Bethany Larson and Aby Wolf and a formidable "rock section" with keyboardist De'Von Gray (Heiruspecs, Chastity Brown), drummer Joey Van Phillips (Dessa's band) and bassist Trent Norton (Honeydogs).

Recording commenced over a 10-week period in 2010, which was the length of the recording class Levy taught at IPR (he since changed teaching jobs to McNally Smith College of Music). The concept was to "create these recordings from the ground up with the students," starting with the composing, and to let them get "hands-on experience working with some really great players," he said.

After the 10 weeks, there was nearly enough to release an album right then and there. Completing it took so long, Levy explained, "because there's a lot of busy people involved."

Finally, Levy and Co. finished off "Our Postmortem," a 12-song collection that ranges in style from the urgent, dramatic rocker "We Are" to the darkly elegant ballad "L'Etoile du Nord" (a love song of sorts for Minnesota), and from the vaudevillian bouncer "Turn of the Century Recycling Blues" to the ornately orchestrated "That's How We Died." The latter two tunes in particular point to Irving Berlin and the Great American Songbook as Levy's less-than-modern starting point.

If there's anything edgy and cool about And the Professors, it's the way the project bridged the local pop/rock scene with the classical music world, a crossover also taking place in the [St. Paul](#) Chamber Orchestra's Liquid Music Series and some Walker Art Center events. Said Arons, "Most of us [in classical] are rock fans, too. It's cool to feel like we're a part of a band."



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Adam Levy

AND THE PROFESSORS

With: Farewell Continental, Ben Rosenbush.
When: 7:30 p.m. Thu.
Where: Cedar Cultural Center, 416 Cedar Av. S., Mpls.
Tickets: \$10, all ages, Ticketweb.com, 612-338-2674.

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"Just to use pickups is kind of exciting for us," she added with a laugh, referring to the amplifier pickups more commonly associated with guitars.

Someone who knows pick-ups all too well, Levy is all for more string arrangements in the rock world, trendy or not. "As a songwriter, it just creates a huge palette of possibilities," he said.

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Best known from backing the Chalice last fall, R&B grind band **Sexy Delicious** celebrates its second album, "Too Hot to Bother," Wednesday at the Icehouse with Black Diet (10 p.m., \$10). G. Love-like frontman Jamie Quinn writes some hopelessly hep-cat lyrics (e.g., "Your fine-ass body won't do," in "Til You Love Me"), but the band shows a hard-sizzling boogie throughout the record, especially in the title track with guest singers/panters Sophia Eris and Lizzo. ... The Artists' Quarter hosts a two-night album release party Friday and Saturday with AQ regular and Secret Stash Soul Revue guitarist **Cory Wong's** new band, **Foreign Motion**, a jazz/fusion quartet also featuring bassist Johannes Tona (9 p.m., \$10-\$15). ...

Fresh from her latest European tour — a long way from her oft-played old hang, the Terminal Bar — snarly pop-rockers **Courtney Yasmineh** and her band perform Friday at Bunkers to tout her fourth album, "Wake Me When It's Over" (9 p.m., \$6). From the Alanis-like title track to the poppy, would-be radio hit "Scrutiny," the record boasts a distinctly '90s sound that's actually rather refreshing, and she shows off a playfully vulnerable writing personality in such tunes as "Ballad to My Other Self." ... Speaking of the '90s, B-Sides leader **Tina Schlieske** has been living in Los Angeles for a decade but comes home on a new EP due Nov. 12, "Pinned Up," featuring all-Minnesota covers of the Replacements, [Prince](#), Hüsker Dü, Soul Asylum, the Jayhawks and [Bob Dylan](#). All six tracks are now streaming at [TinaSchlieske.com](#). ...

Marked by the day in 2003 that frontman Nick Leet hung a "band wanted" flier at Music Go Round in Uptown, Mats-loving barroom rockers **High on Stress** mark their 10th anniversary Friday at Cause with **Little Man** (10 p.m., \$6). ... About 11 turns down on the volume knob, the Aster Cafe is hosting Ukefest on Friday, with the likes of **Katy Vernon**, **Brianna Lane**, **John Munson** and **Natalie Lovejoy** brandishing ukuleles (8:30 p.m., \$10). ...

In what might sound like the Twin Cities club version of "As the World Turns," the Turf Club's longtime talent booker **Ryan O'Rourke** is taking over the same duties at the Triple Rock, whose own longtime booker, **Kermit Carter**, is going to work for Mystic Lake Casino's entertainment division. O'Rourke said he still plans to work at the Turf, just not on the booking end, a decision he made before last week's big news that First Avenue is buying the [St. Paul](#) rock haven.

"I think it's going to be a great thing for the bar, the neighborhood, everybody," O'Rourke said.

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And the Professors
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