

Q&A

## Adam Levy: And the Professors is a Rubik's Cube band

By **Reed Fischer** Thu., Oct. 24 2013 at 9:00 AM  
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Photo by Nikki Tundel

Over the past two decades, Adam Levy's ear for a timeless composition has grown to scholarly proportions. Whether it's rock 'n' roll with the Honeydogs, funk and soul via Hookers & Blow, Rose Room's swing and Tin Pan Alley vibe, stuff for the kids within Bunny Clogs, or going off on a psychedelic jazz excursion for a Liminal Phase show, Levy has aligned with musicians who also bask in the bliss of a well-penned song. Three years in the making, *Our Postmortem* is an introduction to And the Professors, yet another side of Levy's astute and versatile artistry.

The pairing of Levy's Randy Newman-inspired witticisms and meditations with a string quartet scooped from the Minnesota Opera Orchestra -- cellist Rebecca Arons, violinists Conor O'Brien and Margaret Humphrey, and violist Susan Janda -- makes for an epic and catchy listen. Imagine a Wes Anderson film score with the Mississippi River flowing through it. Add gifted friends and past collaborators in keyboardist deVon Gray, drummer Joey Van Phillips, bassist Trent Norton, and vocalists Bethany Larson and Aby Wolf filling out these arrangements, and these Professors have plenty to teach us.

Gimme Noise met up with Levy to discuss the project ahead of tonight's release show at the Cedar Cultural Center.

**Gimme Noise:** *How did And the Professors begin?*

**Adam Levy:** We recorded as I was teaching a production class at IPR. It sorta began as an experiment. I wanted to do an orchestral record for a long time. Holly Munoz, she and I started this together, and then she left to do other things. She said, "How about And the Professors? We're both anthropology majors. We'll play on that." The Honeydogs had done string-arranged songs on a bunch of the records, but I thought I'd like to do an entire project that really leans more heavily on that kind of instrumentation -- mostly strings, but also some woodwinds and things. In the winter of 2010, I decided to put a bunch of folks together, and write songs during this class. I'd write a new song, and the core band had to learn it. We'd bring the string quartet in, and get some folks to arrange. Nobody really knew what they were getting into when they said yes to it.

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*How important was it to do the recording as an ensemble?*

I love getting a whole bunch of people in a space together to play and record. It's so counter to the way people are making art now. People don't go into a large studio and record. You record the drums and bass and do it very piecemeal. You do it in your living room in your slippers and everything. I'm enjoying doing these projects with more human energy and interaction.



Photo by Nikki Tundel

*Why do this project now?*

You outgrow your old identities as you get older. When I was starting out, you had one main project. And if someone is in another band, you'd ask, "Are you gonna have the energy to make rehearsals?" Everybody, especially in this city, there's this freedom that people have to do multiple things. Doing multiple projects, I feel like a better bandleader and a better singer. It makes me fall in love with it again.

*A lot of the songs on the album evoke film scores. Which soundtracks stick out in your mind?*

Film scores pull on heartstrings and create moods. The [soundtrack for \*To Kill a Mockingbird\*](#) by Elmer Bernstein is so gorgeous. When I first heard *Rushmore* and the Mark Mothersbaugh stuff, I loved it because it did everything that I wanted to do in music. It's sort of like Bach meets '60s folk-rock stuff. That informs this a lot. I love the way orchestral music creates moods in a way that I don't think guitars can do. It evokes a different period of time.

*What was it like working with professional arrangers who actually have credits doing this work for film and the stage?*

I wanted [composer/arrangers Robert Elhai, Adi Yeshaya, and Victor Zupanc] to have carte blanche with everything. I had some specific directions about whether I wanted something pizzicato or arco -- some of the basic language around scoring things -- but I really wanted them to use it as an opportunity to do do their thing. They really liked the music when they heard it, and it wasn't really difficult for them to come up with parts. "See-Through Brain (Part II)," which is my favorite song on the record in a lot of ways. The arranger Bob Elhai did so much. It's got woodwinds and strings. We extended the first song, which is the piano piece, into this full-blown combination of Benjamin Britten and John Cage and Charles Ives. I would love to do a whole record like that with none of the rock instrumentation, full-blown orchestral.

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*Where did this project take you as a songwriter?*

In the past 10 to 15 years, I've tried to write songs that can be construed as having multiple meanings. An And the Professors song like "Le Toile Du Nord" started out as an ode to somebody I was in love with. As I was writing it, I realized it was all this Minnesota symbolism. Not because I was trying to write a theme song for the state of Minnesota or anything. But the song was kind of an experiment on a couple levels. One, it's free verse. No rhymes in that song at all. I wanted it to be really impressionistic and iconic images of the history of the state, both good and bad. I talk about the hanging in Mankato, and the lynching in Duluth, as well as just the things that make living here so beautiful. Wherever you go, there's this deep history that's geological, biological, and historical.



*How did you settle on titling the album Our Postmortem?*

People might think it's a [reference to my son's death](#), but all these songs were written before he died. I was thinking about a lot of things related to Daniel, and society as a whole. We're in a really interesting period right now. There's a lot of exciting and cool things going on right now, but I also feel that there is a sort of people feeling overwhelmed and a sense of progress is being lost. We're caught in a bit of a morass. It's about wanting to move on, yet it's just too painful to imagine another world.

*What are the challenges of organizing such a large ensemble?*

The chains of emails are so intricate and exhausting. It's hard to get a rehearsal going. Five people can make it, three people can't. It's a Rubik's Cube band, which makes for some challenges. On the other hand, it's really flattering to me that people are interested enough -- with all of their busy schedules -- to do something with me. I feel really honored, and lucky, and grateful that I make a call, and people figure out a way to make time for it. While we were recording, Matt Darling the trombonist said, "Why didn't you tell me it would be this tough? I would've brought a better trombone." Aby Wolf sings on this and her contribution is great. DeVon Gray, when he heard the record was coming out, he was like, "When are we gonna make the next one?" It's a lot of work. Obviously, the next thing I'm going to do is a solo acoustic record.

**And the Professors. With Farewell Continental and Ben Rosenbush & the Brighton. All ages, \$10-\$12, 7 p.m., Thursday, October 24, at Cedar Cultural Center. [Tickets here.](#)**