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Lava on the Ocean Floor

Boonie Boonie

Iowa State University

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How we learned to stop hating this place and stay in the house.

Stepping into the commune that houses Paragraph Band (Tyler Mucklow, 22, Justin Craperi, 20, Damien Huntoon, 26, Dave Weller, 22), the dwelling is different than the home of your average 20-somethings. Posters of Fugazi and R. Crumb are hung like visual propaganda on the walls. CDs (no Dave Matthews) of bands such as Wilco and the Dirty Three serve as breadcrumb trails from room to room. Novels are bookmarked with broken and creased spines and the soiled porcelain in the bathroom gives off a foul aroma.

This is where indie-savvy punks live. These residents are intent on turning over new musical ground. Their inspiration comes from bands such as Godspeed You Black Emperor and Mogwai, not the hip stylings of a Jimmy Eat World or New Found Glory. These tenants are working on a fanzine tentatively titled Catching the Bus, which includes a column dissing this week's favored genre: emo. The tide of revolution comes from bands such as Godspeed You Black Emperor and Mogwai, not the hip stylings of a Jimmy Eat World or New Found Glory. These tenants are working on a fanzine tentatively titled Catching the Bus, which includes a column dissing this week's favored genre: emo. The title of the column is "Emo Fag Syndrome."

So is location a pertinent factor in living such an uncharacteristic life? Even when removed from one's natural element, which in this case is the West Coast? It appears not. On a balmy Monday afternoon in January, we sit in their smoke-laden living room and talk about life. Is this the place for revolution? Why do they live in Ames, Iowa? Leaving the West Coast

It's quite a detailed story. Mucklow and Huntoon played in a band called the Bicycle Project. They toured the country in 2000 and broke up shortly thereafter. Mucklow and Weller met each other at work and began hanging out on a regular basis. Craperi entered the picture to take on drumming duties. "Justin had just sold his old drum set and was getting a new one, but it hadn't arrived. So he played a snare, high hat and a box for a kick drum," Huntoon says. "Even from there, it just clicked."

The quartet was offered beachfront accommodations later that year. "Micah, Tyler's brother, offered us his place in Santa Cruz, [Calif.], for the summer. We moved there in June, and it was just awesome," Huntoon says.

They lived along the beach, house sitting while Mucklow's sibling was away. That didn't last long. Micah's absence and his girlfriend pestering the band about the house's upkeep drove them away. At a time of desperation, the yet-to-be-named band did some brainstorming and decided to head to San Diego, Calif. Instead, they went to Reno, Nev. "If we were to have moved [to San Diego], there would have been nowhere to play," Mucklow says.

With no job prospects, they headed to Reno, planning to stay for a month. Their goal was to move by Aug. 1, but those four weeks proved difficult. Or perhaps boring. Probably the latter, because it led to "lots of drug use."

"The guys realized they had to leave. So, the Midwest became an option. Weller's parents live in Minnesota, and he suggested moving to a place outside of St. Paul, Minn. It sounded like a good deal: cheap rent and a basement to practice in. Huntoon's mother was living in Michigan at the time, all the more reason to head to America's heartland."

The Arrival

Weller's parents may have been in St. Paul, but the rent in Ames was cheaper and ended up being half of what they would have been shelled out in Reno or San Diego.

"We just came out here," Mucklow says. "We gathered up whatever money we had, rented a U-Haul, packed all our shit in it..."

The four crammed into the cab of the truck like sardines waiting to be an afternoon snack. Having safely made the trek from the state of Nevada through Minnesota, the boys checked themselves into an Ames hotel for a night.

Finding a house was easy. Getting the former tenants to leave was another issue. "The people here would not move out," Mucklow says.

"We gained control of the house on Aug. 2, and they didn't end up moving out until a week later," Craperi adds.

So for one week they pitched tents in area parks. "We broke into the middle school and were taking showers there," Huntoon says. "Until a janitor came in one day thinking no one was there and said, 'This isn't a shelter gentlemen. You gotta go.'"

When the former tenants finally moved out, they left many belongings behind. You know, the usual stuff: "The front half of a Camaro was in the basement, and the back half was in the garage," Huntoon says. About 15 bikes were in the attic, maggots crawled out of the downstairs drains. Meat bones were everywhere else.

"We figured coming to the Midwest would be an all-right thing," Mucklow says. Craperi appears somewhat hesitant. "That was the basic idea, but then we all got wrapped up in the idea of the town and it made us all [low moaning] 'eeegghhh.' It brought us down a lot."

A Singular Life

Paragraph Band, along with Craperi's girlfriend, Karen Torres, live the unorthodox lifestyle of a commune. But it's not what you're
thinking: The place doesn’t reek of Peculi, they don’t grow organic vegetables on the back 40 and there aren’t patches of marijuana scattered about the property. Huntoon’s not for lack of wanting. “Drug use is communal as well,” Huntoon says.

The order of necessities run like this: rent, weed and cigarettes. “If we’re lucky, food,” Torres says. “For a good month and a half, I was the only one working a job.” She isn’t bitter though, making sure to tell the band members, “I do it all for you boys, ’cause I love you.”

For five to live as one requires sacrifices by everyone, privacy included. All secrets, insecurities and inhibitions are thrown out the door. “My room is the communal jack-off room,” Mucklow says without batting an eye. Torres interjects, “They go to check their e-mail.” That’s the code word to warn others of your intentions. They all claim Mucklow’s room is much more humid than other places in the house because it is frequently used to “release built-up tension.” Huntoon says chicks are attached to Mucklow because he walks around with the smell of sex on him 24-7, even if it’s not his own.

Huntoon is adamant about living a strict communal style. “We’re trying to eradicate the greed aspect of living together,” he says. “Our bond is that we’re really close friends and to live communally puts us in a family situation. Our house is our home, and we’re a family here.”

Sure, fights occur from time to time, but they all sit down like a family and talk things out. At times they push each other, but they use that same energy to keep one another in check. Living communally has its bigger problems. “Having with the intention of, “Hey, I wrote this guitar part. Here’s how I want you to play the drums.” For Paragraph Band, working together like this eliminates greed and instills trust.

“Tyler will blow my mind sometimes when I’m playing,” Huntoon says. “It makes me want to play better. Not in a sense that I want to play faster or louder; I just want to sit right where I need to, to be in the entire sound.”

Their live shows are notorious for being excessively loud, which is at once a blessing and a hindrance. Huntoon, referring to a quote made by The Who’s Pete Townsend, says, “We just make a lot of noise and people can’t help but look and listen.”

“I don’t really look out at the crowd, but from what I hear everybody just sits down and shuts the fuck up and watches. It’s either so deafening loud or totally quiet,” Huntoon says.

Another convention thrown out: Music has to make you think. Playing off each other in a sonically dynamic manner, the band hopes to move the audience rather than relying on a socially conscious message. “There shouldn’t be a certain way you play song: verse, chorus, verse, chorus,” Craperi says. “It should just be the way you feel.”

Weller, who has yet to speak, finally sounds off. “Words are overrated.”

Mucklow agrees. The slightest non-verbal nuance can skew a message just enough to deplete it of its original meaning. He believes music is the most understandable form of communication. Those who get it, get it.

So does this mean they’re trying to reach the masses on an accessible level? “It would be nice if people could understand something like that,” Craperi says pointing to a R. Crumb poster titled “No Hope.”

“We’re not trying to aim at any genre. We’re not trying to play for any crowd,” Huntoon says. “We just play. If people like us, they like us. If they don’t, they don’t. We don’t care either way.”

“We broke into the middle school and were taking showers there,” says Damion Huntoon. “Until a janitor came in one day thinking no one was there and said, ‘This isn’t a shelter gentlemen. You gotta’ go.’”

to depend on people as much as we depend on each other puts a lot of stress on the situation,” Mucklow says.

For Paragraph Band and Torres, there is no other way to live. Moving halfway across the country together serves as a communal charter. It existed before the move and will — for better or worse — endure their stay here. “If my friends need money, I’ll give them money,” Craperi says. “If they need food, I’ll give them food, because I know they’ll be there for me, too.”

Music

The same ethics that the group brought to Ames are applied within the structure of the band. Craperi speaks for everyone when he says each member knows his instrument better than anyone else. Nobody ever brings a part

Paragraph Band doesn’t see its endeavor as a means to an end. It’s just a way of life. This doesn’t limit band members from adding keyboards or writing electronic-oriented songs. Thus, there are no limitations to what they can or cannot produce. Time isn’t even a factor.

“I don’t even think about what’s gonna’ happen next,” Craperi says. “This is where I am right now. This is what I’m doing right now. I’m just gonna’ live in it.”

This doesn’t keep the band from working toward a common goal — hitting the road. They’re all working at it, but not dwelling on it. “I’m in Ames, Iowa now. I’m not in Europe,” Craperi says. “I have to be in Ames, Iowa right now. I could be missing out on something here.”
Existing outside cultural acceptability
Since arriving the guys have obtained jobs or have at least tried seeking employment. One of their first jobs was walking behind a tractor, picking up shrubs and placing them in a bag. "I've been cooking for two years before coming to Ames," Craperi says. "I go and apply for cook positions and the only thing they want to ask me is why I'm here. When I tell them, 'I'm just living here,' they're like, 'You're not going to school?' and they start to freak out."

The guys were never short of employment in Reno. They claim one could walk into a casino and be on the clock that same day. It wasn't until leaving the comfort of home that they resorted to their "own little welfare." "We'd go to Hy-Vee, fill the carts and just walk out," Craperi says without regret.

These fellas do not like corporate America. They take the "five-finger-discounts" at Kmart and Target, but will not at independent stores. Whenever they shop for groceries, it's always at Fareway.

Torres claims they stole more than 10 cartons of cigarettes during the first month or two in town. So how does one steal so much?
"You just walk up with a basket and say, 'I'm gonna' do some shopping, do you think I can get a carton of cigarettes?'' Craperi says. "They'll hand it to you, you just walk toward the door, take the carton and that's all you have to do."

Before getting too far into double digits, Craperi was caught. The manager was furious that he lacked remorse. "You didn't even care! You walked out like nothing was happening! You didn't even try to hide anything!"

To infuriate the man even more, Craperi simply answered with, "So?"

These practices haven't become just casual habits. Stealing was, for a short while, a means of survival. "We all did it communally," Huntoon says. "It was a four-man job."

Culture Shock
Besides being taken aback by the lack of work and the demeanor of Iowans, Paragraph Band are also perplexed by the state of the local music scene. The first time Paragraph Band played, Mucklow says people were shocked at the sound being produced. Simple additions like a delay pedal were not a normal piece of equipment used by the locals.

"Iowa State's a pretty unhip school," Huntoon says. "There's a lot of cool things going on, but it's no University of Michigan or NYU."

"The crows know," he says of the birds that spend their days circling Ames. "You can't see it, but they know. They can see the university is dead."

Mucklow says the city's morality is dying.

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heads — these are the wants of a group of guys who worry about paying rent just as much as the next guy. "I look at them as tools we need — tools for our trade," Mucklow says.

Reminiscent Longing
In order to make this band work, each member had to step back and rethink the common goals and intentions established from the start. They have been pulled down by the ambience of Ames. "The thing is, our surroundings give us no inspiration here at all," says Mucklow. "We felt good during the summer — it was beautiful here. We were all pretty stoked when we got here..."

"Despite all the shit we had to go through," Huntoon says. "The contrasting lifestyles, surroundings, people and culture in Ames have taken a toll on not only the family as a commune but also the band. Mucklow says when he looks out his window, it all "looks fuckin' gray — lifeless."

Mucklow has made the decision to head back home to Reno. "I don't think any of us moved to Ames to 'live' in Ames," says Mucklow. "This was just a scene to start a new chapter."

Whether the chapter has been finished, or even started for that matter, is up to the members of Paragraph Band. They may not even know themselves.

"It is important to live in the present because you don't have a future or past... move with it," Craperi says.

Boonie is a senior in pre-journalism and mass communication.