The lyrics that open Low's *Drums & Guns* are as forceful as singer/guitarist Alan Sparhawk is tentative.

"Pretty People," over a stark wave of fuzz, sets the tone for the record: "All the soldiers / They're all gonna die / All the little babies / They're all gonna die / All the poets / And all the liars / And all you pretty people / You're all gonna die."

It's a grim assessment, and the mood doesn't abate for the Minnesota band, known for its minimalist, slow songs and the often-haunting vocal interplay between Sparhawk and drummer Mimi Parker. (The two are married.) Low's 2005 album, *The Great Destroyer*, was louder, faster, and more accessible than anything the band had done, but
Drums & Guns
is a return to glacial pacing, with an experimental sound and a preoccupation with violence.

"Murderer" appears to find fault with no less an authority than God: "One more thing before I go / One more thing I'll ask you, lord / You may need a murderer / Someone to do your dirty work / Don't act so innocent / I've seen you pound your fists into the earth / And I've read your books / Seems that you could use another fool."

Sparhawk is a halting interview, with a run-together "I don't know" or nervous laughter punctuating seemingly every sentence. It's almost as if Sparhawk has channeled all of his confidence into the band's music, leaving nothing for nonmusical interactions.

He calls the album a "primal look at violence and even kind of referential to current issues and stuff. It definitely didn't dawn on me until we were done with the record. That was when we were trying to decide on naming it, and at a certain point I just had to admit to myself that we'd written this ... unflinching ... I wouldn't say a moral thing. I don't know if it's a protest record, but it's certainly a lot more of a bold statement or a questioning of man and violence and godly justification. ... Naming it *Drums & Guns* was when we had to admit that that's what I was doing.

"I knew deep down that this is as as accurate a statement as I could ever hope to make about man and ... whatever ... the dilemma ... ."

Sparhawk said the songs are not about the war in Iraq. *Drums & Guns* isn't "a political record, or ... some real obvious, timely statement about war and the American situation ... ummm ... and ... . Yeah, I guess I was kinda worried about that.

"The word ‘politics' is a tough one for me, because politics to me is more about lies, and trying to convince a group of people to do something to your advantage.

"If we're saying anything political, it's more questioning the individual and not necessarily pointing fingers or offering some sort of solution."

He said his reticence to embrace political music is a function of how a well-known musician's celebrity can overwhelm a good cause. "The personality becomes more iconic with the concept," he said. "It just clouds things, and it makes the message less about what the message is."

Low had been playing the songs live for a year or so in the typical bass-guitar-drums configuration but decided to mix things up when it went into the studio with producer Dave Fridmann, who'd also worked on *The Great Destroyer*. "We felt kind of confident with being a little bit experimental," Sparhawk said. "Probably the key thing was that we set aside our normal instruments and tried to still do the songs with different sounds."

For more than a decade, Sparhawk said, the band has had a recording process. "In the past

we'd always approached it the same way - as a live band," he said. Without their normal instruments, Sparhawk, Parker, and bassist Matt Livingston emerged with a collection of naked vocal tracks adorned with distorted melodies and rhythms crafted mostly from noise, loops, clicks, synthesizers, and drum machines.

"It sort of opens up the songs in a new way," Sparhawk said of the process. "You see them a little bit different."

There's also the joy of discovery with new instruments, that happy accident or a feeling of fleeting mastery. "There's kind of a ... golden moment ... that happens when you're sort of just struggling with some instrument and you sort of have just figured it out, and you are just figuring out the first possible ideas and melodies on it, it's really exciting," he said. "And if you can keep that spirit in there ... you're still going to hear that" on an album.

But there's a cost. "Letting yourself do that, and being able to let go of some of the things you liked about the way you played it the other way - sometimes that's actually the hardest part," he said. "It is a way of opening it up, but it can be a struggle sometimes."

Don't expect to see that struggle on-stage, though. Aside from a World War II-era pump organ, Low's performance opening for Wilco will be the conventional guitar, bass, and drums. "I'm comfortable with letting the experiment be in the studio and then, when it comes to playing live ... ," Sparhawk said. "We have a certain voice we've been given. ... The way that we play, and the way we interact live, we've kind of built this unique language over all these years, and I think it would be sort of forcing it, or sort of dishonest, to throw that aside."

He's building toward something approaching confidence at this point: "I've been trying to figure out how to play the guitar for 25 years now, and it's only in the last couple years that every once in a while that I hear something I like, so I'm not going to give up on it now."

And then after a brief digression, he speaks with the authority of his songs. "Hell, yeah, I'm going to play guitar. Probably the only thing I've stuck to for long enough in my life to develop some sort of handle on."

Wilco and Low will perform at the Adler Theatre in downtown Davenport on Wednesday, June 13. The show starts at 7:30 p.m., and tickets are $26.50. More information and tickets are available at (http://adlertheatre.com).

To listen to the River Cities' Reader *interviews with Wilco's John Stirratt and Low's Alan Sparhawk, visit (http://www.qcspan.com).*