

Stepping Away from the Computer: Planning the Rebellion, "Volume 2"

Written by

Wednesday, 20 June 2007 02:31

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In writing in January about the first release from Planning the Rebellion, the college-age duo of brothers Robert and Scott Cerny, I said, "The band excels when it embraces its electronic elements fully." (See "Unwasted Youth," *River Cities' Reader* Issue 614, January 3, 2007.)

I mention this because for their second recording, bafflingly titled *Volume 2*, the Quad Cities-bred Cernys seem hell-bent on making a fool out of me, or at least calling my judgment into question. The self-recorded CD - roughly 30 minutes of music in nine songs - chucks the electronic processing until the coda that is the final track, and instead tries to skate by on voice, acoustic guitar, and piano.

And we're not talking about built-up layers; the Brothers Cerny stick with simple melodies, and even harmony vocals are rare. The gall!

I'm joking, but the choice *is* bold and daring. Such a rudimentary musical backing leaves the singer and lyrics naked and acts like a magnifying glass on any flaws. The tunes on *Volume 2* aren't an afterthought, but they're primarily background elements accenting Robert's singing and words.

That voice walks a line between tentative and confident, and artless and tuneful, lending even weaker lyrics a compelling genuineness.

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Lyricaly, *Volume 2* offers some surprising maturity. The lead song, "How It Goes," features a chorus that suggests the narrator understands how linked we are, and he implicitly acknowledges his responsibility to the people he affects: "I'm walking in your story / I'm staring at a blank page / Sometimes I don't know what to write."

On "Green Grass & Subdivisions," the duo highlights meaningless words through repetition, and there seems to be an inarticulate but honest struggle with expectations of normalcy: "My pretty house and my pretty wife / Everything's as pretty as it should be / But mother, I'm sorry this is not me / Family portraits / Everyone who's smiling should be / But they're all looking weird to me."

Robert Cerny's words often cut to truth and show more wisdom than we should expect from someone his age, but that's undercut by less-developed storytelling skills. *Volume 2* lacks the telling lyrical details, vivid language, and metaphors that can color and fill out songs and help them make that instant connection with the listener.

Those problems are highlighted on the album's weakest song, "April 16th (He Made the World Weep)," has a sturdy minor-key piano melody and initially sounds like generic grief. But the date gives it the context of the Virginia Tech massacre, and the lyrics are at once too general ("What has happened today? / What do the angels say? / Do they cry like you do?") and strangely rhetorical ("As he chained the door shut with a gun in his hand / When he pulled the trigger did he know what would happen?"). It's a well-intentioned but poorly considered song, earnest and heartfelt but without insight.

"April 16th" closes the album on a sour note that's not erased by the brief, atmospheric techno outro, and it reveals an understandable immaturity in *Planning the Rebellion*. But even with that misstep, *Volume 2* confirms the promise of this young duo.

And brevity, as usual, was a wise decision. The choices the brothers have made would become tiresome over the course of a 45-minute album, and instead they opted not to overstay their welcome.

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Planning the Rebellion will perform at 8 p.m. on Friday, June 22, at Borders in Davenport.

For more information, visit (<http://www.planningtherebellion.com>).