Written by Jeff Ignatius
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When we talked two weeks ago, Garnet Keim of The Blakes was preparing to move from the Seattle home he'd rented for four years.

To where was he moving? "Into the van," he said.

So he was going to be homeless, in a manner of speaking? Keim sounded incredulous that I suggested such a thing. "You could say that," he said. "I have a nice van. I can just sleep in that van anytime."

The Blakes will be performing a Daytrotter.com show at RIBCO on Saturday, October 17, for this publication's 16th-birthday party, and the band's transient nature has been somewhat typical.

When brothers Garnet and Snow were busking in Seattle roughly a decade ago, they lived in a hostel. When the band was in L.A. for two years, they lived in an extended-stay hotel. Then they hit the road.

"We stayed as long as we could [in L.A.], until we just decided to start booking some shows," Garnet said. "It turned into a tour all the way to the east coast. It just felt like the right time to go. If we didn't do it now, you just get sucked into the L.A. vortex and never get out."

They salvaged a van without air conditioning or heat, bolted some seats to it, and were off to Phoenix, Arizona. Garnet called it a "pretty reliable van. It never broke down on us."

The band is named for the poet and artist William Blake (dead 182 years), and the moniker has a blank-slate quality. Even though singer/guitarist Garnet tags his group a "garage band," the name promises a versatility and refinement that The Blakes actually deliver.

There's no denying that the garage element dominates. Garnet, bassist/singer Snow, and drummer Bob Husak (often favorably compared to Keith Moon) can create a mighty ruckus, and a reviewer at the All Music Guide compared Garnet's voice to a "constipated howler monkey." That is obviously not intended as a compliment, but good rock vocalists are rarely good singers, and Garnet is a good rock vocalist.

Yet there's often significant nuance in even the band's rougher songs, such as the subtle way the bass displaces the guitar as the lead instrument on "Dont Want That Now," and The Blakes certainly know how to craft a sexy hook.

The group is also adept at gentle pop in the vein of the Beatles and the Kinks, with the sweet piano bounce of "Magic" a warm elixir. On tracks such as "Lurleen," the trio finds a magnetic middle ground, with the sighing background vocals balancing the edge of the main guitar riff. The closing line of the song is "These people can change like the weather," and The Blakes can, too.

In a 2007 festival review, Pitchfork wrote : "The group blended Dandy Warhols-ish swampy guitars, twitchy Strokes rhythms, and power-pop vocal harmonies, offering an energetic and unmannered romp through modern-rock radio. With messy arrangements and a theatrical drummer fond of the both-sticks-in-the-air poses, their bluesy-cool rock brought a bit of a dirty nightclub vibe ... ."

Despite their stylistic breadth, both the band's self-titled 2007 album and the upcoming *Souvenir* (out October 13) sound organic and unforced. Yet Garnet said the band struggled with its new album so much that it recorded it three times.

The first one, Garnet said, "just didn't really feel right. ... It just kept feeling like we were there. And then you'd sit with it for six months, and it just wasn't there."

The second, he said, sounded too much like the Keim brothers' softer side project, The Beads. "We're The Blakes, though," Garnet said. "We can't have The Beads and The Blakes as the same thing.

"And then we finished this last one, called *Souvenir*, with completely new songs."

That's not quite true. A few songs from each previous session made the cut for *Souvenir*, but the album is largely a fresh start.
"By the time we finally got to
Souvenir
, it was just like, 'We've got to stop this,'" Garnet said. "Even
Souvenir
, it almost turned into another record after that" because of the volume of material.

He said the trouble was the band over-thinking and over-working the songs in the studio with overdubs and the like. "We went back to playing live" in the studio, he said. "Trying to get the band as it was, as it is. A garage band. And that's all we've ever been."

The Blakes will perform at the River Cities' Reader *16th-birthday party on Saturday, October 17, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 8 p.m., and the bill also includes Old Canes (performing first) and Rocket Park (performing last). Cover is $5.*

For more information on The Blakes, visit TheBlakesBand.com or MySpace.com/theblakes . Its Daytrotter session can be found at Daytrotter.com/dt/the-blakes-where-bars-are-the-greatest-places-on-earth-concert/20030271-3737467.html
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