Written by Jeff Ignatius
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To understand some of what makes Dr. Dog sound like it was preserved in amber in the mid-1960s, listen to singer/guitarist/songwriter Scott McMicken talk about drums.

The quintet -- performing a Daytrotter.com show at RIBCO on February 9 -- has a new record (*Shame, Shame*) due out April 6, and for its sixth studio album it finally enlisted a producer, holing up in a New York studio for nearly a month.

"The real crux of the problem in New York was the drums," McMicken said last month. On previous Dr. Dog albums, which regularly sound 40-plus years old, "the drums aren't really dominant ... very muted."

But on the New York recordings, the drums had a modern microphone configuration -- overkill, in McMicken's view. "The real problem was that you were hearing all 16 microphones at once. I knew if I could put my hands on that console and turn off 75 percent of the mics, we'd probably be getting to hear a really cool drum sound."

This is a philosophical issue for Dr. Dog. "Once they [drums] reach a certain point of fidelity they're actually obnoxious in my opinion," McMicken said. "They're demanding too much of your attention, when they're really there for a much more abstract reason -- which is a certain pulse and rhythmic impression."

That's part of Dr. Dog's retro charm. The guys were called the "kings of fuzzy beard-rock revivalism" by *Entertainment Weekly*, which added: "Strict modernists may chafe at the band's

unapologetically backward-glancing aesthetic, but the rest should happily succumb to the shaggy charm of [2008's] *Fate*'s easy-like-Sunday-morning ramblings."

One reason the band hired a producer was to break out of that mold. The cliché goes that studio albums and live performance are entirely different, but Dr. Dog took it to an extreme. This time, the group hoped to make an album that was "more performance-oriented and feel-based and nuanced rather than impressionistic and small," McMicken said. "We kind of worked one set of aesthetic ideals into the ground so far."

The goal with *Shame, Shame*, he said, was "not so much leaving behind what it is we do on stage when we go into the studio like we used to do so much. ... But I'm glad that we used to do that ... because I honestly don't think that we were really ready. ... We've become really comfortable, settled into our identity as a live band. That's taken a lot of time and a lot of years to build up."

The learning process, he added, was accelerated when the band got booked in bigger rooms, and headlined more shows. In those situations, he said, "you've got to be more sensitive. You can't just kind of hack and bash away and expect that to translate in a space that large. ... Just because you're on a stage doesn't mean you know what you're doing. You kind of go up there night after night, practicing in a lot of ways."

When the band hit the studio early last August, it had the space booked until early September and planned to finish recording in that session. But it became evident quickly that the recording professionals and the band had fundamental disagreements. Within the first week, for example, it emerged that the engineer didn't listen to Dr. Dog albums because he didn't like the way they sounded.

So it wasn't a surprise when the band didn't like the new recordings. "The sound was bad for us," McMicken said. "It didn't help our songs. In fact, it made me question whether or not I even liked the songs to begin with."

The band soon realized it wasn't going to finish the album in the allotted studio time and made a decision to turn the studio into an expensive rehearsal room. The focus shifted to spending time

with the songs and the studio's wide variety of instruments. "The control room stopped being a place where we needed to be," McMicken said. "We'd never really indulged the band-ness of our band when making albums" before.

When recording was done, "the only thing we could do was take all those tapes and go back home and work on it for the next couple months," he said. "Nothing sounds the way it sounded in New York. ...

"I do think it's better than it would have been had we finished it there," he added. "And I also think it's better than it would have been had we not gone there in the first place ... ." Each Dr. Dog record has built on the last one, McMicken said: "Dr. Dog, and a little bit of something else. ... Had we not left New York not done ... it would have just kind of been 'something else.'"

The songwriting, too, is different on *Shame, Shame*, with McMicken and bassist Toby Leaman each writing songs that were a bit darker and more direct than the band's typical hazy warmth.

There was "nothing conscious about it," McMicken said. "As soon as Toby or I would start to get conscious about it, we'd start to get uncomfortable. ... Maybe this isn't what we want for the band. ... Do we know how to communicate this? Does our band have a language for this? We've spent so much time really trying to craft a ... much more uplifting sound."

With both the songs and the process, he said, "we couldn't just rely on our old chops."

Dr. Dog will perform on Tuesday, February 9, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 8 p.m., and the bill also includes The Growlers. Tickets are $12 in advance and $15 the day of the show. For tickets, visit RIBCO.com .

For more information on Dr. Dog, visit DrDogMusic.com . To listen to the band's Daytrotter session, click here .