

## DIY A-OK: Centaur Noir, "Rock the Hall"

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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The first two tracks of Centaur Noir's *Rock the Hall* are a study in contrasts. Lead track "Market Street" is a dusty piece of lonesome folk -- guitar, percussion, and a little harmonica under restrained twin vocals, one falsetto and one a hoarse croak.

It's followed by "Only English Spoken," with blunt beats and dominating electronics overwhelming the vocals.

So Centaur Noir, a solo project of Meth & Goats frontman (and Moline resident) Jon Burns, embraces a dual nature. Sometimes the two sides meet -- as on album standout "Ten More Years," in which the lead acoustic guitar is balanced by soft, droning synthesized melodies. But even when they do converge, each song's heartbeat is clearly either folksy or electronic.

Largely self-recorded (with assistance from Meth & Goats bandmate Ray Malone) at Moline's Sound & Vision studio, the aesthetic of *Rock the Hall* is defiantly homemade and lo-fi, and it's merely descriptive to say that the album is simple; one can easily count the distinct elements of each song.

But it's *effectively* simple, with plenty of variety over the 14 tracks and with each song distilled to essential elements; in relatively spare musical settings, *Rock the Hall* establishes its moods efficiently. Against expectations created by its name, the title track is a melancholy and intimate remembrance crafted by hushed vocals and heartfelt guitar within bookends of static noise. "Moving Down the Line" has a soft menace born of a cold texture and multi-tracked vocals discrete enough that they suggest a narrator with multiple personalities. And by making "We Don't Eat Flesh" an upbeat anthem, Burns demonstrates how to hold a listener's attention with a stark contrast between content and tone.

"I like to try to balance everything out, so I'm not doing too much of one thing," the singer/songwriter said in a recent phone interview.

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Burns said that roughly half the songs on *Rock the Hall* were composed on guitar, "without any pre-thought about what I was going to do when I recorded them." Those are the ones with what Burns called a "singer/songwriter feel."

The remainder were assembled in the studio, he said, starting with beats, "building the music and then writing everything on top of that afterwards, after I had the drums and the bass groove and things like that."

Burns said he prefers the latter process. "I like building songs in the studio," he said, "because it's instant gratification, when you're sitting there recording stuff and you come up with a riff or an idea and then you kind of spiral off from there and add more stuff. ... But there's something to be said about just sitting there with a guitar and coming up with a ditty and writing a song."

Given its sound and approach, it's probably not coincidental that *Rock the Hall* is the fruit of Burns learning his way around a studio. Centaur Noir's previous collection was *Boombox Sessions Volume One*, and its title was in no way a joke. "It was just a one-track recording," Burns said.

With Meth & Goats, he said, "I knew how to sing into a microphone, but the whole engineering aspect of it was something that Ray did." Laying down the tracks, he added, is the easy part of recording: "Everything after that is what takes a while to really get the finesse of making everything sound right and mixed right."



The relative crudeness of *Rock the Hall* is mostly charming, with a few caveats. "Wilderness Eyes" is far too similar to the aforementioned "We Don't Eat Flesh" -- in melody, stresses, and the way the title is sung in the chorus.

And I'm eager to see what Burns can do when he's not also dealing with a steep studio learning

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curve. I'm hopeful that familiarity and comfort will result in a more subtle approach that involves more blending and less pairing of opposites -- a trick that works here but one that will bring diminishing returns.

Burns said he's working on an eight-song EP (*Let's Start a War*) for release this summer, and then he'll "marinate on it" -- perform out of the area, see if there's label interest in Centaur Noir, and work on a new full-length.

And he'll continue to roll out his series of "Meditations" -- a project that started as a lark and has morphed into something greater. "I wanted to do a cover of 'We Are the World' just as kind of a joke thing," Burns explained. His plan was to sing over MIDI versions of songs, but he then decided to augment them further.

"I want it to sound interesting and have some musical merit to it for sure," he said. "But there is definitely something funny about me covering a Lisa Loeb song or an Ace of Base song."

He chose some of the songs as guilty pleasures, but he said he often appreciates them more after trying to adapt them: "Some of the songs I flat-out love. Most of them I do."

*Centaur Noir will perform on Wednesday, July 7, at the Bier Stube (415 15th Street in Moline). The show starts at 9 p.m., and the bill also includes The Summer Pledge, Maylane, and Idpyramid.*

For more information on Centaur Noir, visit [MySpace.com/centaurnoir](http://MySpace.com/centaurnoir) or [Facebook.com/centaurnoir](http://Facebook.com/centaurnoir) . Centaur

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