

It's Complicated: El Ten Eleven, September 27 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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It's a sentiment that should come standard-issue with any virtuosity.

"I do have to check myself, because sometimes I can find myself doing overly complicated things, and I think, 'Wait, am I doing this because it makes the song good or because I'm trying to show off?'" said Kristian Dunn in a recent phone interview. "It usually ends up being the latter, and it gets cut. You've got to be tough with yourself in this kind of situation."

"This kind of situation" is pretty funny, because it's unlikely that El Ten Eleven has much company in what it does. An instrumental duo featuring Dunn on guitars (often a double-neck) and drummer Tim Fogarty, the band makes extensive use of looping and effects pedals to build tunes that would seem to need three or more players. "Fat Gym Riot," from 2008's *These Promises Are Being Videotaped*, climaxes with thick bass and twin (or perhaps triplet) lead guitars.

But when El Ten Eleven returns to RIBCO on September 27, there will be just Fogarty and Dunn and the latter's 13 pedals, trying to make the extraordinarily complicated seem like merely good music.

"I want people to just like the music because of the music, not because they know it's just two dudes doing it with looping pedals and all that challenging stuff," Dunn said. "The music should just stand on its own. It should just be good on its own."

Despite their combined technical wizardry, Dunn doesn't think the duo has quite met that

standard. (He's being too hard on himself. While knowing the technical requirements of the music enhances appreciation of it, *These Promises* has consistently strong, dynamic compositions, which are all the more impressive for being vocal-less.)

Dunn said he thinks the duo's fourth full-length, *It's Still Like a Secret* (due November 9), addresses that self-perceived shortcoming. "We've learned some lessons from each one, mostly about what worked and what didn't work," he said of their albums. "A lot about what we don't like and don't want to do again. This fourth one is sort of a summary of ... the best parts of the first three records – at least to us." Gone are the post-rock elements of the first album, he said, and the electro fixation of *These Promises*

El Ten Eleven partly financed *It's Still Like a Secret* through fans, who were offered incentive packages at certain contribution levels. A hundred bucks: "You get a signed copy of *It's Still Like a Secret* and you get to punch Tim in the face (but you have to wear a boxing glove). To be filmed and put on YouTube, of course!" At \$750, investors were offered a package that included "an hour-long helicopter flight with Kristian in Los Angeles (includes lunch)."

Dunn said the band raised "in the low thousands" – including one contribution of \$750 and a few of \$100.

"A couple of them said, 'Don't worry about it. I don't need to punch him.'" Dunn said. "But one guy when we get back to L.A. is going to punch him."

Dunn insists that Fogarty didn't draw the short straw: "He loves that shit. ... He's a weird dude. You've got to question someone who beats things with sticks for his instrument."

El Ten Eleven formed in 2002, and it found its format quickly. "I had all these ideas and I couldn't quite put them together," Dunn said. Fogarty told him about a looping pedal, and when Dunn tried one, "our eyes kind of popped open," he said. "This could work. We could do this just the two of us."

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Dunn then got the idea of using a double-neck watching Mike Rutherford in an old Genesis video. "I started developing ways of playing both necks at the same time," he said.

Because Dunn's setup has only one output, in the studio he records his parts separately so that the band can apply standard effects such as panning. He admitted it's cheating, "but the fact that we can pull it off live makes it okay, I think."

And that double-neck and all those pedals aren't gimmicks, Dunn stressed. "It would be silly if I didn't use them. ... I think of them as an instrument, really. It's what creates my voice."

El Ten Eleven will perform on Monday, September 27, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The show starts at 7 p.m., and the bill also includes the bands Dosh and Baths. Tickets are \$10 and available from RIBCO.com.

For more information on El Ten Eleven, visit ElTenEleven.com.