

Sugarcoating Dark Cores: Mini Mansions, December 11 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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If you want a sense of what Mini Mansions sounds like, interviews and reviews often reference the Beatles' experimental side and the late singer/songwriter Elliott Smith. But you're advised not to raise the comparisons with Michael Shuman, the Queens of the Stone Age bassist who formed Mini Mansions in early 2009.

Shuman has previously been up-front about the influences of and his love for the Beatles and Smith, but when I asked him about Mini Mansions' new self-titled album compared to the Beatles, he responded curtly: "I don't think it sounds anything like them." A lot of writers have repeated the comparison, he said, but "I just think it was the wrong bandwagon."

A trio that primarily employs keyboards, bass, drums, and voices, Mini Mansions – performing at RIBCO on December 11 – plays pop music that immediately grabs you but is also streaked with oddity and darkness. The Beatles comparison is frankly inevitable because of the vocal style and harmonies, and the spirit of Smith is undeniable as well. (For the record, outside of a closing scream and vocal flourish in "Monk," there's barely a hint of Queens of the Stone Age.)

Yet Shuman's dismissal of comparisons is entirely reasonable. Nobody likes the implication of being derivative, and The Beatles are at the root of virtually all modern pop music, including Smith's. More importantly, Mini Mansions' debut – released last month – is so confident and unapologetic in both its weirdness and the way it sugarcoats dark cores that its forebears are largely irrelevant.

The band's sound, Shuman said, was radically different when the trio began, with bandmates Zach Dawes (who now plays bass) and Tyler Parkford (who now sings and plays keyboards and guitar, and who shared writing duties with Shuman). "When we first started, it was a lot more stripped down, and we didn't even really want drums in the band," said Shuman, whose primary roles are now drumming and singing along with some guitar. "We wanted to make it acoustic, almost orchestral without percussion. Using three or four instruments and voices that could create a more ethereal sound, a broader landscape of sound."

But as songs were nearing completion, the players would switch roles. "We would try every song in every way," Shuman said. What they found, he said, was that many songs worked well with a foundation of keyboards, bass, and drums. Mini Mansions still experiments with arrangement and roles, Shuman said, but that basic division of labor has held: "Definitely no rules; it just seems to be the best formula."

Aside from being keyboard- rather than guitar-based, Mini Mansions is distinguished by what Shuman describes as a "weird, towering ghostly feeling over all the songs." It's an element of danger and dread that hangs over the record, a dimming of the songs' natural brightness – an effect alluded to in the album's three tone-setting "vignettes."

Outside of those, "Wunderbars" features flat beats and subdued bursts of noise that pull down the falsetto vocals – recalling the tensions of Mike Patton's Mr. Bungle. The second halves of "The Room Outside" and "Majik Marker" detour into energetic bass-dominated interplay between the instruments. The initially bouncy "Crime of the Season" sneaks from summer to autumn, trading a driving piano for a horror-movie organ.

"It just kind of happens," Shuman explained. "If it's a simple pop song written on acoustic guitar, for some reason I always have this weird urge to just make it feel like someone's coming around the corner – there's this ominous cloud looming over the song."

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I asked Shuman about his favorite example outside of Mini Mansions, and he paused a long time. “I want to say something from the Beatles, but I really don’t want to talk about the Beatles anymore,” he finally answered, grudgingly settling on the opening of “Blue Jay Way.”

Mini Mansions will perform on Saturday, December 11, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The bill also includes Break Up Art and Centaur Noir, and the show starts at 9 p.m. Cover is \$5.

For a feature article on Centaur Noir, visit RCReader.com/y/centaur.

For more information on Mini Mansions, visit MySpace.com/minimansionsmusic.

To listen to Mini Mansions’ Daytrotter.com session, visit RCReader.com/y/mansions.