

No Pretense to Pretty: Meth & Goats, “Leisure Time”; at RIBCO on September 16

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Without casting aspersions, it must be said that Meth & Goats’ new album *Leisure Time* starts at full throttle and never lets up, with few variations in volume, pace, or approach. The Moline-based quartet has crafted a pummeling record that over 32 minutes offers scant relief. The album’s first stylistic breather is the space noise of seventh track “Gem Vision,” which is even more assaultive than the other nine songs.

In that context, though, the album is quite an achievement – razor-sharp, discordant hard rock finding a midpoint between the breathless anger of Rage Against the Machine and the sonically ravenous exploration of Cedric Bixler-Zavala’s and Omar Rodriguez-Lopez’s the Mars Volta and At the Drive-in, without the ego-driven ambition of any of those bands.

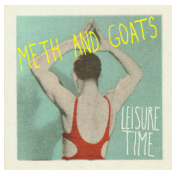
If *Leisure Time* also lacks those groups’ moments of transcendent grace, that seems like a choice: Angular and throwing sharp elbows all over the place, Meth & Goats – which will perform a record-release show at RIBCO on Friday – makes no pretense to pretty. The album is loaded with hooks and urgency and dares you to keep up.

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There are plenty of moments within this core style that are lovely in their way. The 23 punk seconds of “Smash Your Head” are (obviously) devoid of fat but amazingly feel fully formed. First track “Filled Up on Candies” segues seamlessly into “Holy Shirt,” conjoined twins with distinct personalities. The opening trio – closing with “Dart Money” – is an incredibly focused eight minutes that plays better as a whole than as separate parts. And standout “Death on Boats” devolves in its second half into a shrill, martial guitar/drum/bass workout of disciplined fury, like Sonic Youth at its most aggressive.

Despite Meth & Goats being something of an occasional band, guitarist Dan Hockaday, vocalist Jon Burns, drummer Ray Malone, and bassist Talbot Borders are a tight and agile ensemble. Hockaday and Malone dominate, and the guitars and drums by themselves could probably stand alone in the noisy-math-rock manner of the duo Hella. Burns’ vocals display a narrow range, but he’s forceful enough that he doesn’t seem superfluous to the instrumental acrobatics. Borders’ bass, though, does seem largely incidental here – mixed relatively low and unable to compete with Hockaday’s busy-ness and purposefully blunt tones.



This clear and rigid hierarchy – Hockaday over Malone and Burns, and all three over Borders – hints at the limitations of *Leisure Time*’s production and mixing. Admirable as it is in many respects, it is a less-dynamic and overall lesser work than the band’s previous *Attack from Meth & Goats Mountain*

. Though lo-fi,

Attack ...

vibrated with raw energy and a palpable looseness – freedom that was evident in the subtler, quieter passages of songs such as “Come DY K,” on which the bass takes a lead role and the guitar is used in the opening section as effective color.

Leisure Time, on the other hand, is stuck in an expressive strait, and while that results in a marginally more cohesive album, it’s also one that’s harder to penetrate as a listener, especially in the record’s effective but relatively homogeneous first half.

The back end, though, does a lot of correction. The concentrated ferocity of “Smash Your Head,” the spastic, jazzy metal of “Gem Vision,” and the fiery finale in “Death on Boats” provide

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both the variety and signature moments lacking on the front end.

And closer “Meth & Goats” is the biggest change-up. It’s slower and drones and breathes, showcasing melody and bass, and featuring a spoken-word style from Burns and what sounds like a backwards guitar. *Leisure Time* would play better as a whole if “Gem Vision” and “Meth & Goats” were put to better use as contrasts, for instance using them as dividers to split *Leisure Time* into rough thirds. Or maybe the album simply needed another stark departure to break up the opening five songs.

As presented, though, the record remains impressive if misshapen. There’s a great EP in *Leisure Time*, but merely a good album.

Meth & Goats will celebrate the release of Leisure Time with a performance at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue) on Friday, September 16. The show starts at 9 p.m. and also features Tambourine and Jamey Cummins. Cover is \$4.

The album can be downloaded from MethAndGoats.BandCamp.com and iTunes.

For more information on Meth & Goats, visit Facebook.com/methandgoats.