

Recording as Canvas: In Tall Buildings, February 15 at Rozz-Tox

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Less than a minute into In Tall Buildings' 2010 self-titled debut is a moment that hints at Erik Hall's cut-and-paste method. New vocal lines burst abruptly from beneath the previous ones, as if overeagerly jumping their cue. But the music is so carefully constructed that it's obvious this was a choice rather than a mistake, and the effect in an otherwise patient and gentle song is the understanding of a clear vision behind the music.

The album was crafted over four years, Hall said in a phone interview this week promoting his February 15 performance at Rozz-Tox. "I didn't push it at all," he said. "I didn't work on it unless something came to me, unless I had an idea that I knew I wanted to apply to the music that I was already working on. So it was very gradual."

While the album's gestation period was long by music-industry standards, Hall's composing and recording approaches were particularly unusual. He started out with a backbone – a chord progression or rhythmic pattern – and recorded it for the final product. "That's it," he said. "It's not like a demo. ... Sometimes I have to sit and live with that for a good while before I figure out where the vocals are going to come from, what the song is going to be about, and what else

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sonically it needs.” He added with a laugh: “That can take anywhere from a week to a year.”

As the ideas came to him, he’d fill out and augment the song. “The recording medium is kind of my canvas,” he said.

Hall’s care and consideration are evident on *In Tall Buildings* – every sound is purposeful – yet the album in no way feels over-baked. The

Chicago Tribune

[called](#)

the collection’s songs “dense and textured, veering from the jaunty ‘The Way to a Monster’s Lair,’ colored by a swooning clarinet line ... , to the minimalist ‘Fleming,’ which unfolds over a hypnotic nine-plus minutes.” The

Chicago Reader

[said](#)

Hall “matches a pop sensibility ... to an ambitious sonic palette His spacious, handcrafted pop, awash in synthesizers, reverb, and bedroom-recording static, evokes rootless melancholy without wallowing in it.”

The first half is grounded in acoustic guitar and voice, but with plenty of intoxicating texture – from that clarinet to the thick, soft blanket of noise, percussion, and keyboard underneath “Twenty One.” “Suitor” combines multiple aspects of Neil Young: his singing, his languorous ballad style, and a bit of the sound-collage technique of Buffalo Springfield’s “Broken Arrow.” (“I don’t think I would’ve necessarily admitted this at the time of the album, but it’s practically an homage to Neil Young,” Hall said.)

After that bit of skilled pastiche, *In Tall Buildings* busts out of singer/songwriter mode, with “Good Fences” and its energetic rhythms, its processed vocals, and an omnivorous instrumental appetite that ranges from delicately pretty to aggressively odd.

Hall said he’s now working on a new album, but with a significantly different tack. “This album I’m taking a more proactive approach, and actually sitting down every day working on it whether I have an idea or not,” he said. He added that he’s “letting some of this music come into a fuller form in my head before I set out to record it, so that once I do start recording, it’s there and it’s real and I can use a lot of first takes.”

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The new technique, he said, is “proving to be productive. ... I’m actually getting music written and recorded that I am happy about.”

Asked why he changed things up, Hall said his reasons were both practical and creative: “I want this to be my job. I don’t want to just be making records on the side as a hobby. It’s time for In Tall Buildings to have a new record, and so that’s what I’m going to do. And I’m eager. I have a lot of music. ... It’s ready to be finished.”

Cains & Abels, *My Life Is Easy*

Also performing with In Tall Buildings will be fellow Chicagoans Cains & Abels, which will be releasing *My Life Is Easy* in March.

The album is sturdy and consistent in the best senses, melancholy and thoughtful indie rock with loads of expressive singing and guitar. The funereal “You Know Which One” is particularly effective, with nearly cracking lead vocals carrying the emotion until an anguished guitar picks up the torch. The up-tempo but angry “Money” provides a welcome respite, preventing the record from getting stuck in slow-motion moroseness.

In Tall Buildings and Cains & Abels will perform on Wednesday, February 15, at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island, RozzTox.com). White Zephyr also performs. The show starts at 8 p.m., and admission to the all-ages show is \$5.

For more information on In Tall Buildings, visit InTallBuildings.com. For more information on Cains & Abels, visit CainsAbels.Tumblr.com