

Honestly Alluring: Cains & Abels, August 19 at Razz-Tox

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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The Facebook biography of the Chicago-based trio Cains & Abels is four words: “honest rock and roll.”

That might sound glib, vague, evasive, or even a dig at other bands – and it is. But a truer explanation is that singer/songwriter/bassist David Sampson means it, and to expand on the idea would simply take too long. When I asked him a general question about the genesis of “Money” – from the band’s gorgeously, patiently articulated *My Life Is Easy* album – he talked for more than four minutes.

He touched on how his fictional songs seemed to bring their specific sadnesses into his life, and how he decided – almost as a joke – to write happy songs to conjure a different vibe.

“One of the main troubles in my life is money,” he said. He discussed how hip-hop artists rap about what they aspire to, and “if it works out, ... they’ve made it happen by talking about it. ... So I decided at one point that I should try to write some songs about how awesome it is to be wealthy, or at least comfortable financially.”

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He then deflated what had seemed a hopeful tale. “I ended up writing a song addressing money as a lover that spurned me,” he said. “It didn’t actually come out the way I intended it to.”

Even Sampson’s fantasies are weighed down by truth; he couldn’t complete a tongue-in-cheek exercise in wish fulfillment.

Cains & Abels will return to Rozz-Tox on Sunday, August 19, and while I wrote a few paragraphs about *My Life Is Easy* to promote a February show with In Tall Buildings (RCReader.com/y/buildings), Sampson and the album deserve more love. The

Chicago Reader

said that although “

My Life Is Easy

is a heavy album overall, it’s not suffocating, and tracks such as album opener ‘Run Run Run’ – which evokes a less sunshiny Beach Boys – ease the occasionally somber atmosphere.”

The record moves deliberately, with the slow-build tension of the first two songs not released until the end of the third, the title track. Its explosion of majestic guitar frees *My Life Is Easy* from its vocal emphasis, and the remainder of the album balances Sampson’s naked, yearning singing with a thoughtful, sleepy, slightly anxious guitar rock. You can certainly hear echoes of other bands – especially Neil Young outside of folk or garage-rock comfort mode – but Cains & Abels clearly reflects its primary creator’s singular vision.

Sampson admitted that the band’s biography was chosen in part because it’s multifaceted.

“Honest” is indeed meant as a pointed contrast to “disingenuous” music. He cited the example of an “Appalachian affectation,” with college-educated urbanites trying to sound like they came from the mountains of West Virginia.

It also refers to songs dealing directly with real-life experience, and to music being a tool for personal growth.

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It hints that he and his longtime collaborator, guitarist Joshua Ippel, are Midwesterners. “We’re trying to make music that is musically just honest and direct, and music that reflects our backgrounds and the type of people that we are,” he said. Being from the Midwest is “something to be saddled with, I guess. But there is a real openness and honesty in Midwestern culture that we’re trying to kind of channel in our music.” (Sampson says “honest” and variations thereon a *lot*

. It’s a big thing for him.)

And, although it’s a bit contradictory, that word also means being true to his upbringing in the Plymouth Brethren musical tradition.

Sampson grew up in a household in which rock music was forbidden. “Being raised in a really strict, stringent, religious environment, it definitely made me *want* to discover rock and roll,” the 32-year-old said. The music was off-limits in a way it wasn’t to his peers, so “it still had the luster to it that it did for people in the 1960s, I think. It was denied me, and so I was able to through that see its power.”

He heard rock casually, for example at hockey practice. But he connected with the music at his grandmother’s house, where he discovered a collection of 45s in the basement ranging from the Silhouettes’ “Get a Job” to the Beatles. “At one point I tried to sneak all of those to my house so I could make a tape of them so I could listen to them whenever I wanted,” he said. “I got busted. ... They were confiscated.”

Sampson’s parents, he said, believed “it to be in my best interest to stay away from ... what they considered worldly music, or music that wasn’t about our faith.”

The spiritual music of his youth certainly informs Cains & Abels. Sampson said he loves the structure of some of the material – hymns from the 18th Century and the Sacred Harp tradition: “It informed a real fundamental musical sensibility.”

But the treatment – no accompaniment, no trained singers – was perhaps an even greater influence. “It was just a weird room filled with kind of odd people – people who specifically were living outside of society for religious reasons ... ,” he explained. “It’s almost punk-rock in a way – how outsider they chose to be. ... Sometimes there are harmonies, but there’s so little emphasis

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on musicality ... that hardly anybody knows the harmonies anymore.”

Sampson said that from a young age, he wanted to hear his voice rise above all others in the room: “I kind of early on liked the feeling of that. ... I chose to sing as loud as I could. ... That’s how I learned to sing, so then that’s probably still how I sing. Part of that is I’m trying not to use any affectation, other than what came naturally to me as a five-year-old kid.”

And that voice might be an acquired taste, he conceded: “I understand that that’s weird to people. ‘If you can handle the dude’s singing voice, then you’ll probably like it.’”

Sampson said he was encouraged to play music as a child, but school bands didn’t appeal to him. He wrote songs as a teenager, but nobody heard them until he was 20, when he and Ippel performed after a short-lived romance left Sampson desolate.

“I was so entirely heartbroken that I felt the only real response was to sing some songs about it in public,” he said. “Which is insane to me. I think I just felt totally drawn to do it. ... The girl was actually there in the room. And it was the most terrified I think I could ever be of any social experience. ... I physically shook through the whole thing, but still coming out the other end I had the truest exhilaration.”

Cains & Abels will perform on Sunday, August 19, at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island, RozzTox.com). The show also features Tambourine and starts at 8 p.m. Admission is \$5.

For more information on Cains & Abels, visit CainsAndAbels.com.