

Open to Discovery: Plume Giant, September 21 at Rozz-Tox

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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When I spoke by phone with Plume Giant's Nolan Green last week, the interview was scheduled for 10 a.m. in New York, where the folk-ish trio is based. I can't remember the last morning interview I had with a pop, rock, or indie musician, as those breeds tend to shy away from morning engagements. So what self-respecting musician is up at that hour?

"I'm ... currently booking a release tour and working like crazy on the PR for it," Green said. "I was actually already at a different meeting this morning, at 8 a.m."

This detail is not necessarily important or telling, but it illustrates that these May graduates from Yale are actively charting their course, including setting specific goals for sales. So while you probably haven't heard of the band – unless you attended its December show at Rozz-Tox, to which they'll be returning on September 21 – its members are working to change that.

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Formed in 2009 but finding a solid shape in 2010, Plume Giant released a self-titled EP but only decided to pursue the group as a career while making its debut album, *Callithump*, during the last school year. “The more time we put into the album, the more excited we got about the idea of continuing to do it and really getting the album and the songs that are to come after it out into the world,” Green said. That was reinforced by a winter-break tour of the Midwest that included its first stop at Rozz-Tox: “Maybe we should go after this a little more seriously after school.”

Green, Oliver Hill, and Eliza Bagg – all singers, songwriters, and multi-instrumentalists in the band – got nearly 50 shows under their belts this summer on a tour that started two days after commencement. They self-released *Callithump* late last month, and they sold out their New York City release show at the Mercury Lounge – a venue that they dreamed of playing.

Most important, *Callithump* is a charming record, drawing heavily from the folk and bluegrass traditions with its fiddles, guitars, harmonies, and atmosphere but at times startlingly modern. This is apparent on first track “Kensico Dam,” as straightforward, funky, nostalgic warmth gives way to a break of ethereal fiddles and vocals that are as elusive and delicate as wispy clouds.

That dual quality was captured by the blog MyFolkingHeart.com: “*Callithump* is immediately striking thanks to its old-timey sophistication. With jangly keys, woodwinds, and stunning harmonies, it’s not hard to imagine many of the songs being from the ’60s, or even earlier You’ll feel classier for just having listened to it. ...

Callithump

feels incredibly refreshing because it presents you with something you’ve heard before, but not for decades. It’s not a gimmick, though; it’s talent.”

There’s also a strangeness to the record; nearly all the songs take off from familiar geography, but the journeys and destinations frequently have an attention-goosing off-ness – a bit like a musical uncanny valley, except that it’s only initially disconcerting. This is especially true in the vocals: The three voices never do quite what you expect, and the harmonies arrive at surprising points and in unusual forms. “November” offers a flurried squall of horns, but in the song’s almost agonizing patience you might not notice a change in singers for a single lead-vocal line. The singing in “Old Joe the Crow” is full of silly joy and raucous ecstasy without a trace of self-consciousness. That’s followed by the restrained, carefully crafted simple melodies and harmonies of the voices on “Birthday.”

That pairing of experimental rigor with accessibility, Green said, is intentional. Plume Giant

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wants people to find its songs appealing on first listen, but its members also want to make music that's open to discovery.

The core of each song, he said, is written by one member, but then it undergoes sometimes radical changes as the ensemble works it out – with fiddle parts and harmonies often developed in Plume Giant's 1991 Honda Accord. ("That's a good practice space," Green said.) "There's definitely a push/pull," he said, "but that lands us somewhere in the middle where we're all happy and feel like we've got a song that's by the three of us."

Plume Giant will perform on Friday, September 21, at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island; RozzTox.com). The show starts at 9 p.m. and also features Subatlantic.

For more information on Plume Giant, visit PlumeGiant.com.