

The Stooges Cut with Joy Division: The Swayback, October 13 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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There's something strange about the Colorado-based band The Swayback.

It's not that the quartet – which will perform at RIBCO on October 13 – does anything particularly unusual or fresh with its music. It's that with a basic guitar, bass, drum, and vocal foundation and accessible songs, the band has a clear, distinctive, and authoritative voice. Through conviction, chops, and polish, the Swayback enlivens modern-, classic-, and hard-rock formulas – and influences and references – without really altering them. It's workmanlike in the best sense.

Singer/songwriter/bassist Eric Halborg has heard things like this before, and he attributes it to a “contradiction.” On a nuts-and-bolts level, Halborg generally writes the skeletons of songs and vocal melodies, while guitarist Bill Murphy contributes textures. The former works in tried and durable forms, and the latter subtly undermines them.

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“We like to use pop, common songwriting structures and have ethereal ... sounds underneath that,” Halborg said in a phone interview last week. “You’re grounded in a pop structure you can get your head around, but then we’re sending sounds into space, into avant areas.”

This has led some people, he said, to feel torn: “They rock like the Stooges, but something about it’s reminding me of Joy Division.” This, he said is a function of the “machismo” of rock and roll “cut with the consciousness of the art of it, and the expression. ... To have the powers that be sort of speak through you.”

The band has been around for a decade, but the solid *Double Four Time* – released in July – looks like a bit of a breakthrough, with rotation on college radio throughout the summer.

For the first time, Halborg said, the Swayback brought in outsiders to help shape the material. The album had a handful of producers, most notably Andy Johns – who engineered classics by the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin and produced Television’s *Marquee Moon* and recordings by Free and Van Halen.

“We were lucky enough to be at a point artistically where it made sense to work with cats like that,” Halborg said. “And those people push you. And they push you to know exactly what you want to be saying, and how you want to say it, and give you some creative options that you weren’t maybe thinking of before, that change the song. We had always been pretty guarded with composition, sort of keeping other voices that were outside of the band away from our art. ... [But] we knew we were working with some masters at their crafts, and it opened us up to their suggestions, and it made the songs better.”

The Swayback was introduced to Johns through Halborg’s brother-in-law, who claimed that the producer/engineer wanted to record them. In reality, Halborg said, “he had never heard of us.”

The band drove to California and slept for two days in the studio, waiting for Johns to show up. When he did, “he sort of pulled the almighty Andy Johns on us,” Halborg said. “I don’t think he was even listening. ... He was just like, ‘I really dig you. I think you’re a great guy. This isn’t my kind of music and I think I’m going to split.’ I was just like, ‘We just drove out here. What are you

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talking about?”

Halborg said Johns' aggressive disinterest was probably a trick he'd learned from Mick Jagger – treating somebody poorly to see how he would react and if he would stick up for himself. Many years ago, Johns did, telling off the Rolling Stones frontman at a recording session and walking out. Halborg took a different approach, keeping at Johns until he played something that the producer found not disagreeable. Both passed their respective tests.

The Swayback singer said he didn't have the flop sweats; he was in the presence of somebody whose work he loved and respected, so “what was the worst that could happen?”

The band ended up cutting four tracks with Johns, and on “What a Pity Now,” the producer quickly “suggested” dropping the song half a step. (“It wasn't a suggestion,” Halborg said. “That was me being nice. It was definitely ‘That's just how it is, and let's move along.’ ... I knew what was going on. ... Who was I to question?”

Halborg said he knew immediately that the direction was correct: “I could instantly deliver the vocals more naturally I was tapping into the mojo easier with it dropped down. It was something I'd not thought of.”

The Swayback will perform on Saturday, October 13, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island; RIBCO.com). The show starts at 9:30 p.m. and also features the Great Walts. Cover is \$4.

For more information on The Swayback, visit TheSwayback.com.