

Minneapolis Band Brings Its Happy, Soulful Groove to RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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With big beats, a care-free, soulful groove, and a big-ass smile on every song, Minneapolis' Iffy couldn't be more different than its name when it comes to its status as a party band. What is uncertain is whether the trio will get credit for being supreme craftsmen and smart songwriters.

They are, but Iffy's greatest accomplishment might be making those things easy to forget. When the band hits RIBCO on Saturday with local power-pop masters Einstein's Sister and special guest Tenki, the audience won't be praising its intelligence and writing skills; the crowd will be lifted to a higher level of party bliss, and that's all they'll care about. As Iffy sings on its bossa-nova "Georgina": "We all pilots on a different plane." Damn straight.

Two comparisons are inevitable: Prince and Beck. The vocals and hip-happy sound on the Iffy debut *Biota Bondo* (not to mention a shared hometown) certainly recall the Purple One, and the sonic layering and recombination will no doubt remind plenty of listeners of Beck's innovative sounds. (There's also ammunition for those displeased with the way whites such as Beck and Iffy appropriate African-American musical culture, but I'm not complaining.)

There are indeed Princely and Becky elements in Iffy, but, importantly, other things are missing; the band has neither Prince's tremendous ego nor Beck's self-conscious hipness, and their absence makes *Biota Bondo* easy on the ears and the mind. Spiritually, Iffy seems to have brothers in the Beastie Boys, never taking themselves too seriously.

Led by vocalist Kirk Johnson (dubbing himself KjustinJ), Iffy also features Dave Pederson (on guitar, keyboards, and programming) and Tom Mercky (on bass and programming). The trio seamlessly mixes its technological impulses (drum programming, samples, and loops) into its instrumentation, and the result is a happy car accident of sounds that feels more organic than it has any right to. If Radiohead has been tapping into disillusionment with technology in its recent sonic structures, Iffy finds joy in mining machines.

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The generous *Biota Bondo* features 13 tracks clocking in at just under an hour, and there's not a dull or misguided song among them; it might be one of the greatest party soundtracks ever recorded by a single artist.

"Double Dutch" kicks off the album with an impossibly infectious Jackson 5-like hook, and the record never lets up. "Hi-Life" starts with a xylophone and some samples providing the beat before jumping into a marginally nonsensical rap that includes such incongruous lyrics as "equilibrium," "omnipresent," and "hot muscle miracles."

It's difficult to pick out gems from a big pile of them, though. *Biota Bondo* has no flab, but it *does* get more interesting as it progresses.

"Larva Rae" is a mix of lounge sounds and spy-movie guitar, a slinky tune that burrows deep into the soul. You'll hear '70s funk (including a giddily cheesy keyboard solo) aped in the bottom-heavy "Superbad Girl," and that feel segues into a nasally rap on the rich "Proof." The closer "Maskman" is tinged with an Eastern sound and slows things down, giving Johnson the opportunity to *sing* (and sing well), but it's no less compelling.

The album is helped by a large number of collaborators, and the approach pays dividends. In the funk of "Joyrider," chorus and background vocals by Gwen Matthews come out of nowhere and elevate the whole affair. At all the right times, Iffy adds something new and fresh to its sound, keeping the listener alert but always moving.

In Iffy, RIBCO has found another great party band for the Quad Cities (along with the All Mighty Senators from Washington, D.C., due back in town in September). Here's a band that's smart enough to satisfy music lovers without disappointing people who just want to shake.

Iffy will be appearing at RIBCO in The District of Rock Island with Einstein's Sister. Tenki, featuring former members of Tripmaster Monkey, Team Player, Moreno, and Dick Justice, will open. The show starts at 9 p.m., and cover is \$5.