

Has the reverb heavy hi-fi Wall of Sound developed by Phil Spector and fellow sixties producers Joe Meek and Johnny Franz settled for the fog of noise concocted by the shoegazing pedal twiddlers of today's indie rock scene? The answer to that question may be yes. As it was in the mid-nineties with the popularity of bands such as Guided By Voices and Sebadoh, lo-fi is the buzzword of the moment in underground rock, as bands like No Age and Times New Viking openly admit to a predilection for the cheapest, shittiest equipment they can find. When going about recording in such a way, the rawness of the results can be immediate yet impersonal. There doesn't need to be an artistic responsibility attached to the product, since the artist never claimed to take it seriously in the first place.

The Brooklyn, New York, based band Crystal Stilts' Phil Spector approach to pop has found them clumped in with the lo-fi resurgence of late, though the quintet would like the world to know that tag is a misconception and being a lo-fi band has

never been their intention. Before getting into all of that, though, one should start at the beginning, when two twenty-somethings, Brad Hargett and JB Townsend, who were bored with the going-ons of Palm Beach County, Florida, made the move to New York City. "Almost everybody in our circle of friends down there has lived here at one point or another," says Hargett, the Crystal Stilts' singer. "It's like if you're living down there and interested in more than just going to the beach or hitting up the clubs, then you go to New York. You know, it is *the* East Coast city."

Formed in 2003, the group started as two-piece, with Townsend writing and playing most of the instruments and Hargett penning the lyrics and singing. The songs on their debut full-length, *Alight of Night*, were mostly recorded in the summer of 2006, while their self-titled EP was initially released in a limited vinyl-only pressing on their own Feathery Tongue label back in 2005. It was not until the last half of 2008, however, that these two records – and, in

turn, Crystal Stilts the band – have been properly introduced to the world at large, with the revered indie-pop label Slumberland issuing the album in October and Woodsist reissuing the EP in an expanded version that compiles work recorded three and four years ago. When asked why there was such a long wait to release a Crystal Stilts album, Hargett innocently replies, "JB and I didn't really know how to go about being a band, like, we weren't out there playing shows or going on tour. We spent a lot of time writing, and we live in New York, so we have to work too. We were just going on writing songs and trying to find a way to record them. We weren't going about it in the most efficient way."

Crystal Stilts haven't quite made a career as musicians in New York City, but their story is interesting if not wholly typical of rock bands that reside in the musical hot spot of Brooklyn. They still have their day jobs to pay the bills but the borough's bohemian rich music community has granted them the benefits of sharing gigs with groups including Blood On The Wall, caUSE co-



CRYSTAL STILTS

Tape Delays and
Spring Reverbs
BY JARED THIELE

MOTION!, The Long Blondes, and Gang Gang Dance, as well as making a fan out of Hamish Kilgour, the drummer and sometimes songwriter for influential New Zealand post-punks The Clean, all of which has helped the Stilts establish a solid line-up and gain a considerable local fan base. “The first show we ever played, we played on the same bill as the Mad Scene, which features Hamish Kilgour. He came out to about three of our first five shows and was very encouraging, which was incredible to us. Then when we were trying to have a line-up, so we could actually play our stuff live, and he asked us to play a show with The Clean,” Hargett recalls, adding, “I feel a lot of music people were at that show, those people heard us for the first time, and that was really helpful.”

In the last year or so, Crystal Stilts have filled out their line-up, adding to the band bassist Andy Adler, organ player Kyle Forester, and drummer Frankie Rose, who plays standing up à la Maureen Tucker of the Velvet Underground or Bobby Gillespie during his days with The Jesus and Mary

Chain. “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do,” says Rose about her unusual drumming style. “I kind of prefer it because it feels like you’re more part of the band.” She joined the band in 2007, and for a while she was playing double duty as drummer for the Vivian Girls and Crystal Stilts, as well as working a day job too. “It started to become way too much. I was playing a show every single night and working every single day, and my loyalties started lying more on Crystal Stilts. I had to pick one at some point. The Vivian Girls needed someone that could be on tour for months at a time, and I can’t do that much anymore,” she explains. When asked how the addition of new members to the group has changed the band, Hargett says, “Obviously there is a change in dynamic with more people. Writing songs is a little different because there are a couple more people involved. Sometimes I think it was easier when it was just me and JB because we were stopping less, and it’s easier to keep two people on the same page. But the addition hasn’t changed how we think about

our sound.”

Many reviews to date have compared Crystal Stilts to The Velvet Underground, Joy Division, Modern Lovers, and The Jesus and Mary Chain, all of which are somewhat accurate, at least on the surface level. The band’s fusion of pop melodies, clattering rhythms, woolly guitar jangle, and a by and large solemn yet buoyant tone owes a clear debt to the eighties British post-punk scene, although perhaps a greater indebtedness is owed to the C86 pop era (The Pastels, early Primal Scream) and nineties Slumberland acts like Black Tambourine. Hargett’s singing voice is a low, melancholic murmur that’s caked with reverb and can sometimes come off sounding similar to Ian Curtis, though with a vocal emphasis closer to that of Jonathan Richman. Moreover, much as Rose’s drumming style has its forerunners, the band adopts a rather stoic, austere performance manner akin to Joy Division. The group admits there is a connection to be made between these artists and themselves, but when asked what they think about the comparisons, Hargett replies, “I think that sort of pigeonholing is just a result of lazy journalism. You know, the first couple people start talking about you, and then there are a bunch more people taking their references from that.”

Still, when the topic of sixties pop imprints being recognizable in their music is brought up, Crystal Stilts eagerly mention producers Phil Spector and Joe Meek as heavy influences on their sound. “We’re really into Joe Meek; we went through a very heavy period of that, and of course Phil Spector and that sort of sound has always appealed to us,” admits Hargett. “When we were mixing the record, we ran a lot of stuff through reverbs and tape delays to get that sort of sound. The total sound is the aspect of the record we want people to focus on,” adds Andy Adler. The famous Wall of Sound effect acquired through the tape delays and spring reverbs the band use gives their recordings a white noise effect that has inadvertently clumped them in with the recent lo-fi revival, but Hargett insists that was not their intention. “There is definitely a lo-fi thing going on right now,” he observes, but retorts, “I feel like because there is a lot reverb on our stuff it gets labeled as lo-fi. But Phil Spector wasn’t doing lo-fi, he was using the best analog equipment of that time to create a Wall of Sound, and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

Alight of Night (CD/LP, Slumberland, 2008)

Crystal Stilts (12”, Feathery Tongue, 2005; CD/LP, Woodsist, 2008)

myspace.com/crystalstilts



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