

13 Engines coming at full throttle

BY TIM COVERT

I spoke to John Critchley of 13 Engines over the phone last week. He was at home in Toronto before the eastern leg of the band's tour in support of their new album *Conquistador*. They play at the Birdland on November 3 with Punchbuggy and Chixdiggit. \$6 cover.

Gaz: Any change in band philosophy that comes up with *Conquistador*, a rather conquering sort of name?

John: First of all, the name appears in a song, Tailpipe Blues, on the album. [But] in no way is the album a concept album. A bunch of songs seemed to have imagery of travelling and water and space and it just somehow seemed to relate to these very vague notions. On top of it all, we just liked the word. It's like the album is a suitcase and the title is the handle that you pick it up with.

Gaz: *Perpetual Motion Machine* (ed: 13 Engines last album) was a little tighter and hookier, and when you mention space...I guess that describes the difference between it and *Conquistador*. Was this a direction you'd been moving towards in your live shows or was it a conscious effort to open up the sound?

John: We didn't really have a lot of conscious thought put into it. A lot of what really determines it is the song itself. This is a new batch of songs and hopefully you try to figure out what makes the song click and find the way to get inside the song. A couple of things are different on the album; the songwriting — the musical part — is credited to the band for the first time. There's a bit more of a group thing going on there. Also, this is the first time that it was a band production — along with Doug Olson. Those things have effects.

The other thing was in terms of production of the album, with *Perpetual Motion Machine* we went into the studio with a pretty clear idea that it was going to be a studio creation. There's a lot of overdubbing, there's a lot of doubling of guitars; with this album we wanted to try and take a step back from that. Specifically, we wanted to try not to do as much double tracking with the guitars. When you double track guitars it gives like a thicker, grindier type of sound. This one we didn't do as much of that. That was a conscious decision to more often have it just Mike's guitar on one side and mine on the other side and leave it like that.

Gaz: Does this represent more what you guys sound like live?

John: No. To me...when I'm on stage playing it never sounds like what's on an album. I've sort of conditioned myself to not even think in those terms. One is happening at the moment and the other...runs through about a million miles of circuitry before someone buys it and puts it on in their car stereo at fifty decibels and filters it through their speakers...

Gaz: Being in the role of production and having to hear the songs so many times, do you still enjoy playing these songs?



13 Engines: John Critchley making kissy face for the screaming legions of fans.

John: Yeah. I mean, they're still pretty new to us for us to play them live. I am used to hearing them so much in the studio that they're sort of encoded into my DNA. Once we finish an album I try to forget the album. When we play it live, the album version isn't really in my head so it's a new sensation.

Gaz: What should the people at Birdland expect from your show next week? Will it be a run through of *Conquistador*, both albums, news songs?

John: We have a few new

songs. *Conquistador* is our fifth album; a lot of people think it's our second. Our first two albums were on an indie label in Detroit called Nocturnal Records. Our first album is called *Before Our Time*, our second is called *Byram Lake Blues*. Both those came out in the late 80's in pre-cd days and that's why a lot of people don't know about them. But we're having them re-released in January, together, on one disk. Sometimes we play songs from those albums; some people know them. Our third album, our first with EMI

which is called *A Blur To Me Now* came out in '91.

Gaz: Your vocals are great but unusual. I expected you to have an unusual speaking voice but you don't. Is that the way it comes out when you sing or did you have an inspiration for the sound?

John: I wasn't a good singer to begin with. Learning Neil Young and Bob Dylan tunes and listening to their records probably isn't going to make you any better of a singer. I used to have a really nasally voice. And then I studied music for a couple of

years at York University in Toronto and part of that was a singing course. So I got to learn more about technique and stuff but I dropped out of it after a while because I didn't want to sing like Robert Goulet. I didn't want to be on Broadway or sing opera.

Gaz: So you dropped out before the transformation was complete...

John: Yeah. And be a lousy rock and roll singer. That's all I wanted to do. So it's a combination of the way I learned and what God gave me. On top of it all, my favourite singers, rock singers, or country singers...are people who are more stylist and could never do Broadway. The ones that could are the ones I hate. Like the lead singer from the STYX; he could probably do Broadway. I'm more interested in hearing Lou Reed croon off-key.

Gaz: Tailpipe Blues is sort of an interesting sidetour of the record. Are you a big blues fan or was it a "Hey, let's do it" in the studio one day?

John: To me it's more in the vein of a country blues [than] in terms of the blues blues. I love a lot of country music. I can't stand modern country but Hank Williams is a genius. There's been few better songwriters than him.

Gaz: I still like Johnny Cash.

John: Oh yeah, definitely. His last album is awesome. Just him and his guitar the whole album. He's a great songwriter, too. Willie Nelson is a fantastic songwriter and I love the sound of his voice. It's so weird and wrong-sounding. On almost all of our albums there's been a song that's gone in that sort of direction. To me it's not such an anomaly. But to someone who only likes "Smoke and Ashes" and "More" it's probably a weird thing. I think because people don't know more of our albums they'll probably think, "Good Lord, what are these guys doing? Where did this come from?"

Not as thick and hooky

CD

Conquistador
13 Engines
EMI



13 Engines are a rock band. But they're not boring as most bands with that label are wont to be. Their cutting twin-guitar sound blends to propel the 13 songs on *Conquistador*, their new album, to a point where you can listen to them all in a row and never be thinking, "When is this going to end?"

The music on the album is attributed to 13 Engines but the real force of the music is in the sometimes gooey, sometimes razor sharp guitar lines of Mike Robbins and John Critchley. In general, the guitars are of a gravelly texture, but range from crisp, clear acoustic strumming and banjo picking by guest Lewis Melville, to raw and noisy riffs. The bass of Jim Hughes shines through on tracks like "Bird of Prey" and "Reptile Boy," but for the most part joins the cymbal-heavy drums of Grant Ethier to provide a stable, if unremarkable, backbone.

Conquistador is not as thick and hooky as the band's last album, *Perpetual Motion Machine*, and at first the space is a little disconcerting for fans of that record. Additional listening makes the difference far less evident, however, and the consistently enjoyable songwriting shines through.

There's no gratuitous wanking on the record, and at the times when it does approach wankiness, the song almost immediately will switch its feel so that your interest is held.

Lyrical, the songs on *Conquistador* — credited to individual band members — read as slightly hokey, with vague metaphor and abstract imagery. They're not bad but just unusually unobvious for rock-alternative words. However,

Critchley's treatment of the lyrics makes them shine. His vocals are one of my favourite aspects of the band and every song features his urgent, straining tone, augmented by the pointed, taut harmony of Ethier and Hughes.

My favourite intense tracks on this record are "Vermillion," "Reptile Boy," and "Menefreghista" which is Italian for "one who doesn't give a fuck." "Cootie Girl" and "The Listener" are slower tracks that caught my attention. "Tailpipe Blues" is a country blues song that emphasizes the strong old-country influence on the band (see interview with John Critchley above) with its pedal steel guitar and unmistakable twang.

This isn't as rock-out an album as *Perpetual Motion Machine*, but for those of you who could listen to that album from start to finish in aural delight, *Conquistador* will let you listen twice as long.

TIM COVERT