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Local rockers the Ashtray Hearts reflect on six years together and what they hope to find straight ahead

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Music and Melancholy IN MINNEAPOLIS

BY ERIN MADSEN ♦ PHOTOS MARSHALL LONG

Local rockers the Ashtray Hearts reflect on six years together and what they hope to find straight ahead

What do you get when you cross a group of friends with a few instruments and a case or two of cheap beer? In cities and towns around the world, the answer is uncomplicated: the making of a band.

The Ashtray Hearts were no different. What started in Minneapolis six years ago as a three-man band with an accordion, two guitars, and an occasional piano, morphed into a six-piece ensemble that would go on to release a couple of CDs and head out on tour twice across the U.S. and once through the U.K.

"We've gotten to be better players," says lead singer and guitarist Dan Richmond. "For better or worse we understand each other's strengths."

But just a year after its critically acclaimed second release, *Perfect Halves*, the band is redefining itself—and its goals—following the relocation of piano and accordion player Brad Augustine, who moved to New York in fall 2005.

Melancholic and thoughtful, the Ashtray Hearts' music gets its structure from basic life



PHOTO COURTESY OF DZ IMAGES

questions, experiences and relationships, but the songwriting is a bit freer and unexpected, with lyrics that flirt with the abstract—keeping both the band and their listeners guessing what's next. When told that there was some confusion about the meaning behind the song "English," Richmond admitted that he's still trying to figure that one out himself.

"Overall [the music is] hopeful," says Richmond, 31, the band's front man and official spokesman. "But it's also sad because of the minor chords and tempo." The stories told within the songs often result from observing relationships and how people react to what's going on around them, he says. As chief songwriter, Richmond is responsible for bringing well-crafted lyrics to the group, which then builds upon the words and melody. "What's exciting is that there's

always an element of surprise. You come in with a skeleton of a song and it comes out more differently than you could've imagined," says the south Minneapolis resident. "It gets to that point where it all comes together and the hair on your neck might rise."

And Richmond will tell you that Minneapolis is a great city for new bands to experience such camaraderie. "I think it's easier for bands to be heard here. It's almost the Minnesota way to get recognized—playing lots of shows and building from there. If you're 23 and have the ability to sleep on floors, you can do well here."

But for the Ashtray Hearts a lot has changed in the last six years. Marriage. Parenthood. Professions. A willingness to sleep on the floor. All the guys work during the day in full-on careers: Dan Richmond is the program director at KFAI radio;

HOMEGROWN > Dan Richmond created Free Election Records (www.freeelection.org), home label of the Ashtray Hearts, in 2001 because he understood that if the band wanted to control its art, that was the only guaranteed way to do it. In addition to the Ashtray Hearts' two albums—*Old Numbers* and *Perfect Halves*—Free Election Records produced the 2002 compilation *Apartment Music*, which includes 14 tracks by such Minneapolis bands as Kid Dakota and the Owls.



The Ashtray Hearts (from left to right) in their practice digs— a Longfellow basement—John Jerry, Steve Yernberg, Dan Richmond, Ryan Huber Schelfe and Aaron Schmidt.



PHOTO BY BRAD AUGUSTINE

ON THE ROAD AGAIN > After completing a short U.S. tour the year before, the Ashtray Hearts took their music to the U.K. for two weeks in summer 2003.

drummer John Jerry builds high-end amplifiers for Atma-sphere; Steve Yernberg (guitar, piano, banjo, vocals) is a math teacher; bassist Ryan Huber Scheife is a graphic designer; Brad Augustine makes a living in

“I’m busy and I’m happy—two things that stand in the way of good songwriting.”

— DAN RICHMOND OF THE ASHTRAY HEARTS

New York as a mechanical engineer; and Aaron Schmidt (trumpet, piano and vocals) “doesn’t want the world to know what he does.” “There was a point where we all wanted to [play music] full time,” Richmond says. “But now we’re all six, seven years into our careers. We’ve been on the road and we understand the economics. We’re realistic about what our expectations are.”

The band will roll out a second promotional push for *Perfect Halves* in early 2007, collectively figuring out how to go about finishing their third record, which they were only three songs into when Augustine headed east. “I think we can still get some mileage from [*Perfect Halves*],” Richmond says. “Our first CD was done when we had enough songs.

It could be another couple of years before the third is ready. I don’t want to get to the place where I’m writing songs to fill up space. That doesn’t make for the most exciting music. ... I’m busy and I’m happy—two things that stand in the way of good songwriting.”

Originally from Waukesha, a small town outside Milwaukee (five of the six members grew up in Wisconsin), Richmond says traveling is his main source of song-writing inspiration. It’s with this wanderlust that Richmond headed to Ireland and England following graduation from the University of Minnesota in the late 1990s, bar-backing his way through Dublin and working as a bike courier in England. “I had a lot of time to write,” he says.

“Traveling is when I write the most—even

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when I'm out of town backpacking. You have more time to observe, think, reflect on what's going on. Here you just get caught up in the details of everyday life. Writing is about the ability to step back and appreciate the little things."

The time abroad had a couple major benefits: Richmond wrote enough material to account for half of both Ashtray Hearts albums, and the connections he made came in handy when the group set out on tour across the U.K. The weeks the group was on the road—two weeks in the U.S. in both 2002 and 2005 and two weeks in the U.K. in 2003—were good lessons in the importance of touring to a band's success. But with such a large group in tow, it is a constant struggle to weigh the costs and benefits, Richmond says. "The U.S. is hard because it's so spread out," he says. "Our most successful tour was in the U.K. in 2003. We were playing 150- to 350-seat venues, and then got some help from BBC DJ Bob Harris, who took a liking to us." Harris picked up on the Ashtray Hearts and put them on a compilation disc, which led to two weeks of well-attended shows across England and Scotland, as well as a BBC studio session. It's the kind of good luck the band hopes to meet again.

In the meantime, the band sticks to practicing in Yernberg's Longfellow basement a couple times a week, performing 20 or so shows each year at venues like Saint Paul's Turf Club and the new 331 Club in Northeast—two of the band's favorite places to play. They're also seeking new avenues to peddle their music, like pursuing the TV and film industries, both of which are responsible for catapulting bands into the mainstream with soundtracks or a several-second sound bite. Local filmmaker and friend Wyatt McDill will use some of the band's music in his upcoming independent film, *Snowbird*, which enters production this winter.

Staying current with the local music scene is a constant battle for everyone including Richmond, who concedes that lately he's been concerned with getting to bed at a decent hour so he can make it to the gym early the next morning. "Not very rock-n-roll, huh?" he laughs. "I'm starting to freak out because I'm missing out on seeing local music." That being said, he will tell you that the Owls are the best band in town for their humbleness and respectable approach to making music and delivering it to audiences.

Asked to name both a blessing and a curse of being in a large band, Richmond answers quickly—blowing past the possibility that the subject hasn't crossed his mind before. "The best part of being in a band with six people is that we have a lot of people to bounce ideas off of. And then when Brad moved to New York, we could shift roles," he says. "The toughest part is coordinating schedules. And economically, [touring is] going to be a loss. It's basically going to be a group vacation."

But the key to success—no matter if it's just to pass time or a way to build a life—is "staying true and not trying to impress anyone other than yourself," Richmond says. "And have the opportunity to get on the road and play some really great shows in front of some really great audiences."

With Augustine taking the lead and splitting town, it's a fair question to pose: Has he or any of the other guys considered moving? "All the time. Everywhere that I've gone, I've thought, 'This is great. I'd love to spend more time here,'" Richmond says. "But this is home. I really don't know if there's a better place to live." ■



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