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Blame You

BY MICHAEL GRIGEVICH

Things happen quickly for **Obits**. Not much more than a year ago, the Brooklyn-dwelling outfit played its first show at the Cake Shop in New York City. Almost immediately, a bootlegged recording of that set hit the Internet and lit up the late-night blog circuit. Record nerds took notice and the Internet hype machine came rumbling forth. Hard to believe a poor-sounding recording of a band's first show could rouse such interest, but proof positive comes on March 24th, 2009, when Sub Pop releases *I Blame You*, the full-length debut from Obits.

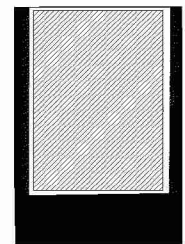
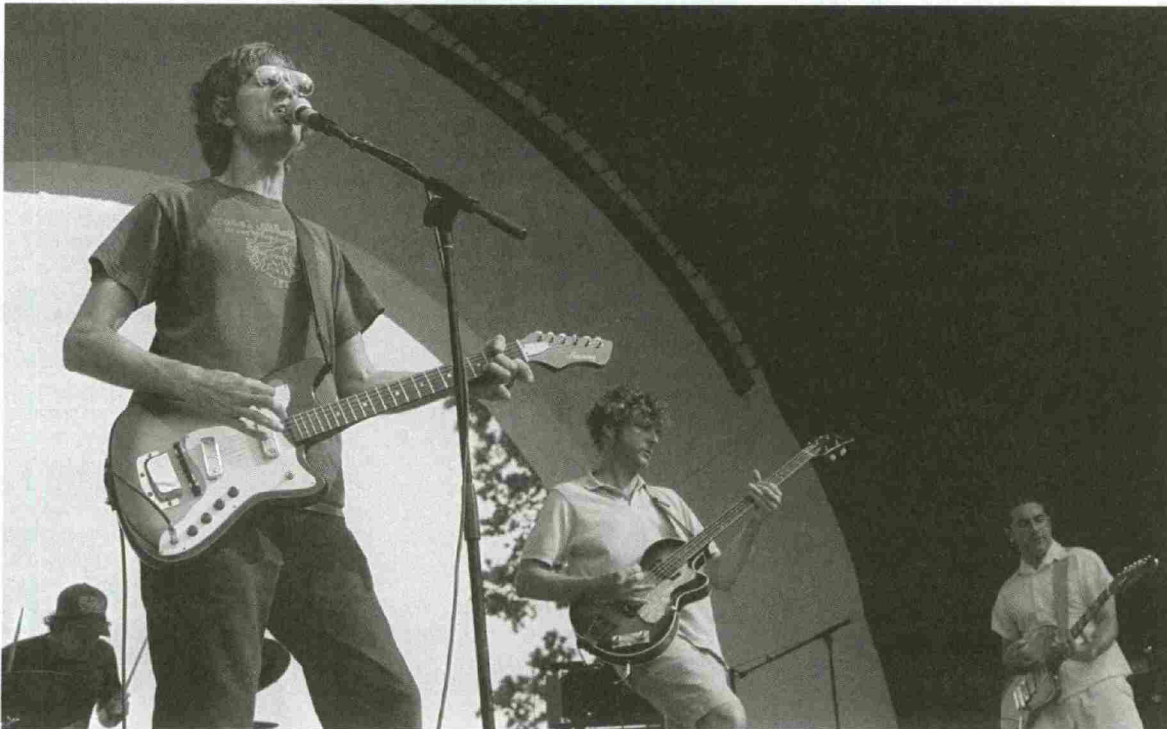
When it comes to the reasons behind such a successful surge, vocalist and guitarist Rick Froberg offers an undiluted analysis. "It would be nice for people to listen to this band" on its own terms, he says, "but, you know, one of the reasons people are listening to it, and one of the reasons why there is any interest in it, is because the bands that we were in before have sort of peaked people's interest." Froberg is, of course,

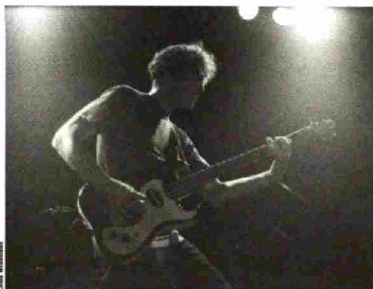
referencing his former outfits Pitchfork, Drive Like Jehu, and Hot Snakes, as well as fellow Obits' guitarist and vocalist Sohrab Habibion's previous band Edsel. Sure, such associations helped provide the initial curiosity, but to be fair, Obits have crafted what is perhaps one of the finer rock'n'roll records of the past few years.

I Blame You does not necessarily break new ground, nonetheless the wide sonic pallet from which it samples puts a refreshing spin on things. There's the energy and sonic melee of early Crazy Horse; the conversing guitars of Television; the raw-throated vocal delivery that recalls Creedence Clearwater Revival's Jon Fogarty at his pugilistic best (Froberg handles most of the vocals, however fans of Habibion's previous work are in for a treat with "Run," the sole song on which he takes the lead); and, of course, rhythms and structures that summon the best of Jehu, Hot Snakes, and Edsel. All in all,

the songs on *I Blame You* are so well-written they border on the indestructible; this fact, coupled with a musical delivery of genuine intensity, helps the album cut through the glutted indie rock market like a razor-sharp machete. For some, though, Obits' swift ascension may belie the thoughtfulness and work behind its formation and creative process.

Formed in Brooklyn sometime in 2006, Obits grew out of Froberg's and Habibion's desire to play music together. Around this time, Hot Snakes' disbandment was in the not-too-distant-past for Froberg, and Habibion had been putting his energy into soundtrack work. Fueled by the interest to start a proper rock combo, Froberg's friend Scott Gursky was recruited to play drums and the band started rehearsing. Various friends and associates drifted in and out until the quartet gelled with bassist Greg Simpson. This stable line-up began hashing things out, a process which Habibion recalls.





"Even though we had a lot shared interests, we weren't really sure what the sound of this new thing was going to be. And we didn't want to try to predetermine it in any way. You know, it wasn't like a concept band or anything like that," Habibion says, adding, "It took us awhile to figure out what version of the music that we like was gonna be what we could play – that felt natural to us." With *Obits*' direction in play, the writing of the songs that would end up on *I Blame You* commenced. It was some time before the group even considered performing live. (Indeed, many of the songs from *Obits*' first show are included on the full-length).

When it comes to the songwriting process, Froberg remains fairly reticent, offering that *Obits*' interests lie mostly in writing "crappy rock'n'roll songs that sound good." Conversely, Habibion reveals a process much more painstakingly focused on individual elements of structure and craft. According to Habibion, the role that the vocals would take in the music was an important topic of discussion from the beginning. "Something that Rick and I talked a lot about when we were first starting this, or maybe even before we were starting it, was that the bands that he and I had been in, the singer always sort of got the short shrift," he explains. "Cause in a lot of stuff that kind of grew up out of being in hardcore bands or punk bands, the singer was just sort of expected to sing over the top of whatever the music was, and the music was... written, completed, and then it was the singer's job to do his thing. And, it didn't leave a lot of room, I think, to necessarily make the music work around what the vocals could be."

One can certainly hear the vocal possibilities of which Habibion's speaks at work on *I Blame You*. "Two-Headed Coin," one of the album's strongest tracks, features some of the most nuanced vocals of Froberg's career. During many moments, Froberg's voice functions as the lead instrument, writhing and yelping over an impeccable, strutting bass line courtesy of Simpson. The reverb heavy guitars often serve to punctuate select vocal lines, which is a dynamic possibility that remains underexplored by many bands. As such, "Two-Headed Coin" serves as an example of the kind of thinking Habibion fosters. "Truth be told, when you listen to pop music, you respond to the human voice. So, it doesn't matter how cool the guitar part is; if

the person's voice is lame, or you don't relate to it, then there's no other lick that can kind of save it."

In addition to the attention placed on vocal arrangements, musical exploration played, and continues to play, a key role for *Obits*. According to Froberg, "The band isn't really based around your chops; it's based around your idea, or what you like." Habibion's take on the nuts and bolts of songwriting seems to build upon Froberg's notion of ideas versus talent. "For us, it [songwriting] happens in a couple of different ways, which is that either somebody will come in with an idea either whole or partial and then present it to everybody else," Habibion explains. "And we sort of start working on it. Sometimes things sit around in kind of part stages for a long time. And then maybe we'll work on something else, and then we'll realize this thing that has been gestating a while ago actually has a home now. So, we'll sort of reintroduce it." Habibion also acknowledges that members will sometimes introduce almost-fully formed compositions to the band. "Other times, there'll be a song where, let's say Rick will come in with a pretty fully formed thing. Or, in the case with the one song I sing on the record ["Run"], you know, the kind of meat and potatoes part of it were already there and then we just fleshed that out."

For Habibion, there seems to be a greater degree of compositional freedom with *Obits*, as he suggests that the band does not have any rules. Froberg, however, offers a slightly self-deprecating corrective. "There are rules, and the rules are sort of determined by our limitations. We're not the greatest musicians ever." Limitations aside, one thing is clear: *I Blame You* is meticulously written and recorded. Habibion supports this claim, as he explains that "the one thing that we did do at the very end before we went into the studio, which I think was the most helpful, was that we actually took the songs apart and really tried to listen to how the individual components played with or against each other. So, you know, Greg and Scott would just work on the rhythm bits for a little bit, or Rick and I would just quietly play the guitar parts. You know, there are times in a practice space you'll be playing loud enough where you can't always hear the subtlety of what somebody else is doing."

After a listen to the whole of *I Blame You*,

one would be hard pressed to ignore the songwriting subtleties, musical elasticity, and pristine production found on the record. Album opener "Widow of My Dreams" works as a perfect introduction to a near-perfect album. The opening guitar lead descends over a 4/4 drum beat, both of which are bisected by a double picked, reverb drenched guitar line that mutates into a ringing chord; the whole thing, in a matter of seconds, shifts into an arresting Crazy Horse/Creedence-inspired rocker, full of beefy riffs and twangy guitar leads. Froberg sounds playfully defiant, as he pleads "Leave us alone, maaaa / Leave us in Peace." The song continues to surprise, as it closes with some great interplay between Froberg and Habibion's guitar. Another highlight is the Habibion-sung track "Run," a small detour from the howling and rock-heavy orientation of much of the album. In addition to showcasing the emotional power of Habibion's voice, "Run" underscores the set-your-watch-to-it sharpness of Gursky's and Simpson's rhythm section.

Leading up to, and sometime after, the release of *I Blame You*, *Obits* will play selected dates around the country, most notably a stop at Sub Pop's showcase for the South by Southwest Festival. *Obits* does not desire to tour nonstop, however, as many members are married, have children, and full time jobs. The band will, nevertheless, hit the road occasionally. Froberg and Habibion feel confident in *Obits*' future, and even offer some plans for it. According to Froberg, "We're hoping to keep the band together and keep it going in the face of, you know, economic pressures and family pressures." Habibion looks forward to how the possibilities of the road will affect the band's creative process: "I think the thing that will be interesting – having been in this band in basically a practice room scenario for so long where we can sort of luxuriate in our creative wanderings – it'll be interesting to see once we're actually more active as a proper band, as far as, you know, in a public sense playing shows... I'm curious to see how that will affect our songwriting. We'll have less time to practice."

SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

I Blame You (CD/LP, Sub Pop, 2009)

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