

Focus | nature boys

**Fruit Bats**  
**Spelled In Bones**  
(Sub Pop)

A bewitching collection of low-key pop, Fruit Bats' third album, *Spelled In Bones*, ends with nearly 40 seconds of atmospheric sounds, letting fluttering birds and rustling winds bring the album to a close. That's fitting, since from start to finish, *Spelled In Bones* strives to entertain without drawing too much attention to itself. That's not to say that Fruit Bats frontman Eric Johnson doesn't know how to write catchy songs; writing catchy songs seems to come naturally to him. But he also knows how to make them burrow into listeners' consciousnesses rather than bludgeoning their way in. *Spelled In Bones* has more than its share of hooks, but it's just as much about letting little lap steel and banjo passages create a mood. Johnson clearly wants listeners to sing along. He just wants to earn it first.

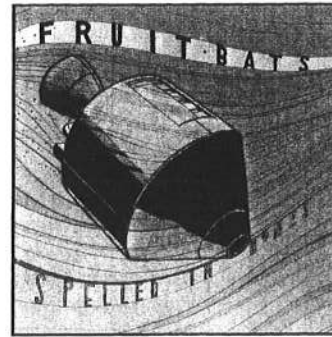
For instance, the album-opening "Lives Of Crime" starts quietly, then builds as sentiments like "You gotta have a heart like a lion" take over. Overall, however, the album is less defined by its passion than by its lightly psychedelic introspection. Over a bittersweet piano line, "Traveler's Song" repeats the line "God's no better than you, just bigger is all," until it sounds too sweet to be blasphemous. "Legs Of Bees" piles on a Robyn Hitchcock album's worth of nature imagery, imploring listeners, "Take your earplugs out [and] hear what the birds have to say." The band's inspiration seems to come as much from the outside world as from a record collection that doubtless includes plenty of old Byrds and Band albums, a smattering of Elephant 6 releases, and some CDs from the Bats' labelmate The Shins. It's hard to talk about Fruit Bats without at least mentioning The Shins, but that's mostly because they sound so philosophically aligned. Both bands discover a tuneful world of heartbreak and pleasant surprises in the 10 square feet around them. —Keith Phillips



**Fruit Bats**

Chicago indie rocker gets off the sofa to write perfect pop songs  
**Who** Head Fruit Bat Eric Johnson spent the mid-Nineties "smoking a lot of pot, watching movies and quoting them a lot." But a stint on guitar with indie rockers Califone got him off the sofa, and he founded Fruit Bats, recruiting a revolving cast of backing players. Fruit Bats' Sub Pop debut, 2003's *Mouthfuls*, was an overlooked, quiet near-masterpiece; *Spelled in Bones*, out on July 26th, is more upbeat but equally entrancing.  
**Sound** Johnson, 29, sings heart-rending retro-pop melodies (think labelmates the Shins) over woodsy arrangements. Says Johnson, "The folk and country elements come from me trying to sound like the Kinks and the Rolling Stones trying to sound like folk."  
**Show time** Fruit Bats' "Rainbow Sign" popped up on *Six Feet Under*, but Johnson has another show in his sights: "I love *The O.C.* I say that without irony or guilt." **BRIAN HIATT**

Rolling Stones



**FRUIT BATS**

**SPELLED IN BONES** [Sub Pop]  
[Fans of Califone, The Shins, and The Rolling Stones' *Flowers* take note.]



Eric Johnson has his twang back. The ex-Califone member makes his return with a lovely folk-rock masterpiece that proves the wait was well worth it. *Spelled In Bones* is equally stellar pop romanticism and string-bending folk. What was anticipated to be a dark-coated pop confessional has turned into a bittersweet symphony of hope and contentment. It's not to say that Johnson is gloating with happiness, but songs like "Legs of Bees" ("Take your earplugs out and hear what the birds have to say") and the beautiful waltz roundabout meets Beach Boys-like harmony of "Everyday That We Wake Up It's A Beautiful Day" shows an appreciation for the simpler side of life. *Spelled In Bones* is overwhelming with escapism that makes you want to slide back into your chair and indulge in the moment. Johnson is a true

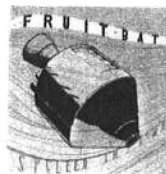
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Music For The Mind  
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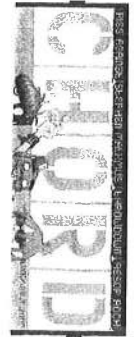
JUNE 2005

**FRUIT BATS**

**Spelled In Bones** • Sub Pop



Since **Fruit Bats'** rustic and folksy debut, *Echolocation*, in 2001, the lineup has changed several times and so has their sound. Constant through all of their releases is founder and leader **Eric Johnson's** quirky lyrics and his unique pop compositional skills. Joined by two of his former bandmates, **Dan Strack** and **John Byce** from Johnson's 1 Rowboat days, the trio lays down twisting, melodic tunes with big harmonies and equally impressive and experimental arrangements. *Spelled In Bones* is a highly enjoyable 11-song, 35-minute triumph for Johnson's new Bats. "TV Waves" and "Legs of Bees" shine particularly bright and with a little luck, *SIB* should chart a clear flight out of the dark caverns of obscurity for the Fruit Bats. ★ *Tyson Schuetze*



# American ★ songwriter



## FRUIT BATS *Spelled In Bones* (SUB POP) ★ ★ ★ ★

With just a glance at the band's photo, it is clear the Fruit Bats can be nothing short of pure indie-pop goodness. And, well, they are, merging all the sweetness of Beatle-esque harmonies and arrangements with the gritty pop exuberance of Squeeze or World Party. This doesn't mean they are simply echoing those who came before them (though in many ways they are), but by taking the highlights of their elder peers, they are finding fresh outlets for their brand of joy. Some will call this folk-pop, but for all the acoustic strumming, lush harmonies, delicate warbling and—at times—ethereal, trippy lyrics, it is the rich voice of Eric Johnson that keeps the Bats' wings flapping. The result is a sunshine-y disc that could have worked as perfectly in the acid-blissed '60s as it does in the less-than-innocent '00s. That said, if anything, this music may be that much more important now.

—GLENN BURNSILVER



## FRUIT BATS *Spelled In Bones* Sub Pop



With each successive release, Eric Johnson seems to hurtle his band further toward normalcy. Johnson, the sole enduring Fruit Bat, jettisoned the gauzy Chicago experimentalism of 2001's *Echolocation* and now he's ditched the few remaining rhythm loops of 2003's *Mouthfuls*, honing in on an economical cousin to Fleetwood Mac's commercial heyday (save the pub-rock undercurrents or siren vocalists). Johnson's reedy voice bears a resemblance to Lindsey Buckingham, and he displays a similar ease with high registers, as he impressively harmonizes with himself on tracks like the airy, bittersweet "Canyon Girl." Johnson continues his lyrical fascination with nature, advising on "Legs of Bees," "Take your earplugs out, hear what the birds have to say." Built equally on piano and strummed guitar, the breezy, inoffensive melodies of *Bones* are just as stinging and serene. >>>GLEN SARVADY

Link [www.fruitbatsmusic.com](http://www.fruitbatsmusic.com)

File Under That '70s Flow

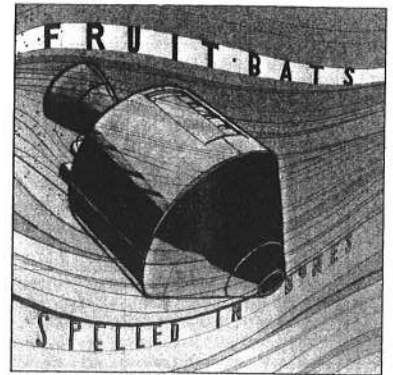
RIYL Chartbuster-era Fleetwood Mac, Sloan, Apples In Stereo



## FRUIT BATS

*Spelled in Bones*  
(Sub Pop)

The Fruit Bats are a charming band led by a charming fellow named Eric Johnson. Their latest, *Spelled in Bones*, is chock full of breezy melodies that recall sticky summer nights spent on your porch staring up at the stars and that tingling sensation you get when you first hold someone's hand. Johnson's consonant delivery brings to mind Robyn Hitchcock, particularly his solo work. While the Soft Boy viewed the world through a quirky, psychedelic lens, Johnson and his Fruit Bats are unabashed romantics, proudly wearing their hearts on their sleeves. "Legs of Bees" starts with an optimistic set of la-las that sound like they're coming from a transistor radio. Johnson goes through a nostalgic roll call of being "down at Makeout Creek" and "up in Lookout Point." But as in any relationship, along with the good comes the lumps. In the bittersweet "The Wind That Blew My Heart Away," Johnson pleads, "Save yourself, 'cause I'm sinking with this ship" and part of you goes down with it. [SUJAN HONG-RAPHAEL]



Fruit Bats

## "Spelled In Bones"

Available: Now • Price: \$13.98

Sub Pop, the behemoth of independent record labels, strikes again with the Fruit Bats' newest release, "Spelled In Bones." We are pleased to be able to count on Sub Pop to get us through this time of year's expected lull in music releases.

This album gets off to a raucous start with its opening track, "Lives Of Crime." With lyrical candy the album lures you in and takes you for an emotional, optimistic ride, culminating with the seventh track, "The Earthquake of '73," in which vocalist Eric Johnson pleads: "So I'll do my part/Not to break your heart/And, baby, please don't break mine." This song is begging us to listen to it. Over and over. And again.

We can't help but compare this band to The Shins, and some of the cracks and ambient effects hark back to the good-feeling days of The Beatles. That's right, The Beatles. (We're not afraid to say it, either.)

Music this rousing should come with some sort of warning label.

**FRUIT BATS** ★★★½

*Spelled In Bones* [SUB POP]

Former Califone utility man fuses Shins wordplay with Sir Paul's songcraft

Eric Johnson and his revolving cast of Chi-town cohorts set out to follow their spacious, indie-folk-rock gem, *Mouthfuls*, by making a "dark bumper record with shades of optimism." But as Johnson worked on the slightly more-polished *Spelled In Bones*, his life started getting better, he admits. So things turned out inverted—a hopeful record with gusts of melancholy.

Given the autumnal acoustic strums that begin opener "Lives of Crime," it feels like *Bones*—both musically and mood-wise—picks up where *Mouthfuls* left off. And while it certainly builds on that foundation, this time the Fruit Bats dust off the '60s-pop handbook, coasting McCartney-style melodies and spicetangling two-part harmonies over pretty-as-a-pillbox-hat chord changes.

While *Bones* isn't as instantly accessible as its predecessor, it certainly provides more to mull over. Like

labelmate James Mercer of The Shins, Johnson's penchant for clever, offbeat word choice breathes life into even the most tired themes. *Steve LaBate*



**Entertainment** WEEKLY

**FRUIT BATS**  
**SPELLED IN BONES**

DATE JULY 26 LABEL SUB POP



Eric Johnson has a subscription to *National Geographic* and he's not afraid to use it. On the band's first record in two years, Johnson's Fruit Bats complement their usual country-inflected pop with plenty of natural imagery—bees' legs, earthquakes, the sea, etc. Plus, it has your usual poppy love songs and hand claps. *Bones* is less experimental than previous Bats albums, but their quirky confidence remains.

**B** MARIA CREGG

AMPLIFIER ■ 50

**Fruit Bats**

*Spelled in Bones*

Sub Pop

Eric Johnson's affinity for the earth (as in soil) has seemingly deepened after trekking to Seattle to record his band's third long-player at fellow Fruit Bat Dan Strack's S.O.D Studio. Hunkering down in the Pacific Northwest's rainy, loamy environs cannot help but influence the musical makeup of a project. *Spelled in Bones* is a warm and inviting record, topped off by Eno-inspired reptilian and bee-buzz guitars ("Lives of Crime," "Silent Life," "Traveler's Song"), humming analog synths ("Canyon Girl," "Legs of Bees"), and pedal steel guitar ("Born in the '70s"). The yearning harmonies, hand claps, tambourines, and the occasional well-flexed falsetto are all tastefully applied, resulting in stripped down, unfussy accompaniments. The best qualities of the '70s are on display not only in several song titles, but in the hushed and sparse tone, the gentleness of the melodies, and the languid production style.

-LARRY O. DEAN

**FILTER** mini



*Fruit Bats*

*Spelled in Bones*  
Sub Pop

88%

Sub Pop has become the de facto home of sublime, homespun folk-pop, so it's no surprise that Fruit Bats' *Spelled in Bones* oozes hazy, delicate beauty from its pores. "Silent Life" would make for a great soundtrack to Thoreau's *Walden*; the banjo-effect in "Canyon Girl" is like some strange fruit that begs to be picked. Try filing this record next to your Folk Implosion and Death Cab for Cutie—you'll go batty for it.

CHI TUNG

**SPIN**

**HEAVY ROTATION**  
WHAT'S BLASTING FROM THE  
SPIN OFFICES THIS MONTH

**Fruit Bats**

*Spelled in Bones* (Sub Pop)

On his band's third album of catchy folk pop, Eric Johnson writes the kind of '60s ooh-ahh melodies and comfy harmonies that would've fit nicely on the *Rushmore* soundtrack. (*Caryn Ganz, associate editor*)

# Independent

Santa Barbara



outing will be the Bats' first in three years, and an opportunity for Johnson and Co. to flesh out a whole slew of new tracks.

"The most important reason for this tour is that we're recording literally like a week and a half after we're done with it," Johnson explained. "This is like the working of the knots out of the songs thing, which I've never been able to do. It's a savings, go into the studio, fly by the seat of your pants, and hope this works. This is going to be [a venue] where everything is really preprinted out."

So the band will not be arriving empty-handed. Following a crazy, frenzied 1.5-hour-long stint in the studio a few months back, Johnson emerged with five brand spanking new songs. Following that, Johnson re-learned with his Chicago cohorts for a second round of recording. From it, the frontman has pieced together a full-length demo of sorts, which he promises will be up for grabs during this first leg of touring.



© courtesy sub pop records

"I'm not Mr. Profile," said Johnson, laughing. "Sometimes people will write me and say, 'Can you put a song on my compilation or 'Can you do a seven-inch for my label?' and I'm always like, 'Uh, I don't really have anything.' So, it's been long enough time that I actually do have some odds and ends—but I'm keeping 'em for myself," he said. "They'll be for the folks who come out and come to these shows."

While it's doubtful Johnson will have a tough time packing the small-by-comparison clubs he's scheduled to play, one has to wonder what the transition will be like. Following the release of every festival in sight, not to mention venues the size of San Francisco's Greek Theater and our own S.B. Bowl?

"I have no illusions," Johnson asserted. "Of course I was having a blast with those guys, but I was really amazed about the off-the-cuff aspect of songwriting the whole time. But the grass is always greener. I'll probably miss the incredibly lavish backstage choice platters when I'm on this tour." He joked. "You want to have it all?"

And while Johnson may not have it all just yet, few would contest the notion that he's come a mighty long way. Since forming the Fruit Bats in 1999, he's persevered through numerous in-band personnel changes, joined one of the most famous indie acts in the world, and all the while still manages to find time to pursue his own songwriting career. Not too shabby for a folk rocker from Chicago.

Following their West Coast jaunt and studio sesh, the Fruit Bats plan to release their fourth album and take to the road for a full-blown tour. But, till then, Johnson remains humbled by the prospect of what the future might hold. "I have no idea who's coming out [to these shows] anymore," he said. "It's been a long time since we've been on tour. I'm cautiously optimistic."

## PROFILE

### CAREER COUNSELING WITH

What you're about to read is a job.

Partially. It's a maze. Mostly. The reason the following is to be taken lightly is because the man you're about to encounter is a highly gifted artist. He is not a sidewalk poet, nor pockets loose change or a hardscrabble last cause of a writer who couldn't scribble his way out of a paper sack. He is no hobbyist; he does not moonlight.

But he does aspire big, if he says so himself. If he hunted, it would be for the largest game out there—sycamore-sized elephants and six-footed lions and gorillas. And if he gambled, he would be all-in—the house, the farm, and the inheritance. He wonders about his limits and capabilities. Like most, he questions if his life is well spent and not frittered on involuntarily. Unlike most, he has an answer to that, preponderance of doubt.

"I've been thinking I have to do something with my life, but I haven't been to college so I decided I should just set some unrealistic goals."

He's gone so far as to write a thousand-word essay entitled, "My Other Career Options if This Whole Music Thing Doesn't Eventually Pan Out," posting it on the band's Web site. He spotlights six of the choicest occupations.



1. Catch the Fruit Bats on tour in September. 9/6-9/16, Houston. 9/17-18, Salt Lake City. 9/19, Salt Lake City. 9/20, Denver. 9/21, Salt Lake City. 9/22, Salt Lake City. 9/23, Salt Lake City. 9/24, Salt Lake City. 9/25, Salt Lake City. 9/26, Salt Lake City. 9/27, Salt Lake City. 9/28, Salt Lake City. 9/29, Salt Lake City. 9/30, Salt Lake City. 10/1, Salt Lake City. 10/2, Salt Lake City. 10/3, Salt Lake City. 10/4, Salt Lake City. 10/5, Salt Lake City. 10/6, Salt Lake City. 10/7, Salt Lake City. 10/8, Salt Lake City. 10/9, Salt Lake City. 10/10, Salt Lake City. 10/11, Salt Lake City. 10/12, Salt Lake City. 10/13, Salt Lake City. 10/14, Salt Lake City. 10/15, Salt Lake City. 10/16, Salt Lake City. 10/17, Salt Lake City. 10/18, Salt Lake City. 10/19, Salt Lake City. 10/20, Salt Lake City. 10/21, Salt Lake City. 10/22, Salt Lake City. 10/23, Salt Lake City. 10/24, Salt Lake City. 10/25, Salt Lake City. 10/26, Salt Lake City. 10/27, Salt Lake City. 10/28, Salt Lake City. 10/29, Salt Lake City. 10/30, Salt Lake City. 10/31, Salt Lake City. 11/1, Salt Lake City. 11/2, Salt Lake City. 11/3, Salt Lake City. 11/4, Salt Lake City. 11/5, Salt Lake City. 11/6, Salt Lake City. 11/7, Salt Lake City. 11/8, Salt Lake City. 11/9, Salt Lake City. 11/10, Salt Lake City. 11/11, Salt Lake City. 11/12, Salt Lake City. 11/13, Salt Lake City. 11/14, Salt Lake City. 11/15, Salt Lake City. 11/16, Salt Lake City. 11/17, Salt Lake City. 11/18, Salt Lake City. 11/19, Salt Lake City. 11/20, Salt Lake City. 11/21, Salt Lake City. 11/22, Salt Lake City. 11/23, Salt Lake City. 11/24, Salt Lake City. 11/25, Salt Lake City. 11/26, Salt Lake City. 11/27, Salt Lake City. 11/28, Salt Lake City. 11/29, Salt Lake City. 11/30, Salt Lake City. 12/1, Salt Lake City. 12/2, Salt Lake City. 12/3, Salt Lake City. 12/4, Salt Lake City. 12/5, Salt Lake City. 12/6, Salt Lake City. 12/7, Salt Lake City. 12/8, Salt Lake City. 12/9, Salt Lake City. 12/10, Salt Lake City. 12/11, Salt Lake City. 12/12, Salt Lake City. 12/13, Salt Lake City. 12/14, Salt Lake City. 12/15, Salt Lake City. 12/16, Salt Lake City. 12/17, Salt Lake City. 12/18, Salt Lake City. 12/19, Salt Lake City. 12/20, Salt Lake City. 12/21, Salt Lake City. 12/22, Salt Lake City. 12/23, Salt Lake City. 12/24, Salt Lake City. 12/25, Salt Lake City. 12/26, Salt Lake City. 12/27, Salt Lake City. 12/28, Salt Lake City. 12/29, Salt Lake City. 12/30, Salt Lake City. 12/31, Salt Lake City.

### PLAYBACK

including being an official bikini inspector and a competitive eater. Then he goes on with a freedom list of the following: "In addition to the preceding choices, it seems just as reasonable that I could also become a NASA Mission Control guy, subsistence farmer, toy inventor, taxidermist, hot dog vendor, search and rescue SCUBA diver, garbage man, hippie, beloved character actor, Washington State Ferry operator, cheese maker, percussionist, Naval Officer, consultant (spiritual or fashion) to the stars, fish breeder, TV show creator, exotic plant breeder, food stylist, political analyst, therapist, founder of a Thai fast food chain (called 'Zui Thai Up'), founder of a Mexican fast food chain (called 'El Serpiente Peligroso), owner of an art house movie theatre, police photographer, baseball announcer, holistic healer, astronomer, mammalogist, monk, radio personality, owner of a chic New Orleans eatery, or a samurai."

[Fishtrone's Max Fishel] is a character that's very similar to myself," Johnson said. "I was 21 or 22 when that move came out, and I remember thinking that I wasn't so far removed from him. I was not really very good in school because I was so preoccupied with all these little projects."

Said projects have not been good resume builders should he eventually have to turn to fish breeding—were it absolutely necessary financially—but they've stationed him on solid footing musically. 2001's *Entolization* was recorded on a four-track and encouraged by fellow Chicagoans Tim Rutili and Ben Massarella, who happened to be members of California and operators of the independent label Petrus Records. A giant leap forward came two years later in the form of the band's Sub Pop debut, *Mouthfulz*. The gleeful melodies and absent lyrics were so abundant that they could have submergued a submarine. The newest offering, *Spores in Bones*, is another big harvest that shows Johnson living by the pen, not the pick.

"I liked how you talked about the '60s and '70s sound for a second and then immediately the subject's been the cause of past agitation, he's asked to elaborate. "It's kind of what makes me become. A lot of people have gotten stuck on, 'What's your sound?' Sometimes I think it's shy by andumble, but things have played themselves out in music. People recycle things. I definitely have recycled lots of things."

Johnson can eat with his lyrics. They're his chopsticks. His well-developed non sequiturs become sequenced into lovely folk takes that couldn't sound like platitudes if they tried. They are gloried in a sly pop pizzazz that Robert Schneider of Apples in Stereo or Miles Kurosky of Beulah would lick to the last drop from their sticky hands if things got messy.

"I think slowly, as time has gone by, I've grown more brave in what I write about," Johnson said. "When I first started writing, I did all this imagery stuff. When I look back now, with my current self, it sounds impersonal. I've started to be more personal. And I mean personal in a universal way. I've succeeded in doing that now."

"I think to get noticed, you have to write real English and you have to stick out like that. My lyrics aren't literature though. They're kind of subtle. I've never heard anyone say, 'You're literate.' My stuff is not like that. I'm almost literary."

He's a colleague to those who are considered the bookish types, though far from being complete nerd-otiana bookophiles like the Decemberists' Colin Meloy. But James Mercer of the Shins and the rest of the cream from the Sub Pop camp aren't much for plotting.

"I've never had a conversation about songwriting with another songwriter. We talk about arbitrary and more fun things," he said. "With James [Mercer], we once talked about how everyone seems to think that I love the Beach Boys even though he doesn't really like them as much as I people think he does. I have that same problem. It's not like I have conference calls with Jon Wine or Regula Vave. And if they did, they'd all likely just talk about how close they were getting to just saying, 'I'm through,'" and becoming a xander. "I'm through," and becoming a xander. "I'm through," and becoming a xander.

By Sean Moeller

courtesy sub pop records

## Fruit Bats' Eric Johnson

Shins Member Brings His Own Band to Muddy Waters

Thursday, January 29, 2009

By Aly Comins

For Eric Johnson, the past few years have been a whirlwind of sorts. A longtime friend and fellow music maker of Shins frontman James Mercer, Johnson was asked to join The Shins in early 2007, directly after contributing to their Grammy-nominated third album, *Wincing the Night Away*. As the lone stable entry behind the Chicago-based Fruit Bats, Johnson was more than thrilled to take Mercer's offer—but not at the cost of his own musical baby.

"When I got the job with The Shins, I had a lot of people say to me, 'Congratulations, man,'" Johnson recalled. "I was sort of like, 'Why? What did I do?' I just got hired in somebody's band. There was kind of this idea that people were like, 'Well now you don't have to do that Fruit Bats thing anymore. Good for you! You're off the hook!' It was this American idea of, as long as you're on TV, it's not really just about creating stuff. It's sort of about visibility, or whatever. I absolutely love being in [The Shins], but I like writing my own music too—it's really fun."

While not always upbeat, one can tell by listening to Johnson's music that he has no regrets. With three Fruit Bats albums (2001, *Entolization*; 2003's *Mouthfulz*; 2005's *Spores in Bones*) and a recent deal with Sub Pop under his belt, Johnson seems to have mastered the art of pop-guitar-driven folk. His songs vary from straightforward sing-alongs to abstract bluesy jams to country-tinged indie pop without ever sounding unapproachable.

And it's with a whole new bag of tricks that Johnson has gathered (and programmed) his fellow Fruit Bats (Graeme Gibson, Chris Sherman, Tom Lewis, Sam Wagster) and booked an 11-date West Coast tour, which rolls into this town on Sunday, February 1. The