

100 Musicians Answer the Same 10 Questions

Part Thirty-Eight: Jesse Kates of The Sexy Accident

instigated by dave heaton

Jesse Kates leads the Kansas City-based band The Sexy Accident, whose debut album *Tourism* has been one of the year's true delights. It's infectious, punchy pop-rock, with songs rooted in everyday life - one of those albums easy to play again and again, and enjoyable each time. To catch up with the band, and listen to their songs, check out their [website](#) and [MySpace](#) page.



What aspect of making music excites you the most right now?

Singing. I spent the five years before the Sexy Accident writing instrumental music of one kind or another. First with Whitford, then Bandocalrissian, then with my solo looping guitar stuff. I love instrumental music, and the "pop" bands that I like (e.g., bands that have verses and choruses) still have unique instrumental underpinnings. But all along I've really loved the storytelling aspect of music with words. The honest truth is it took me a while to finally muster the gumption to start singing in public. I've always been a writer, and some of the songs on the first Sexy Accident release are six years old. Finally getting those songs recorded properly has really got me energized and inspired to write new songs. I really can't move on until work that I've done is given its proper due. When I have a backlog of unrecorded material, it's time to record, or there won't be any new songs forthcoming.

At this point, I look at the instrumental music as my "training

- this month's issue
- archive
- about erasing clouds
- links
- contact

with Ninjas in the orient" phase. I learned to communicate without words. I figure if I can still do that, if I can carry an emotional message solely through the instrumental component, then when I bring the lyrics in the whole package will be as powerful as it can be.

What aspect of making music gets you the most discouraged?

Lack of time. The need to balance writing, rehearsing, marketing, designing flyers, keeping up with the newsletter, etc. There's so much to do, and I enjoy all aspects of it. But since I'm not in a position to make music my career, it can be difficult to do everything with the level of quality that I'd like. I have a wife and a new son, and they're my top priority when I'm at home. My day job isn't exactly slouchy, either. The music is getting increasingly squeezed.

But I'd rather be busy than bored, and stopping is not an option, so it's all good. Maybe someday we'll have some help that we can really count on, somebody to take care of the business end while we focus on being a band. But I don't know if that happens anymore, or if it ever did.

What are you up to right now, music-wise? (Current or upcoming recordings, tours, extravaganzas, experiments, top-secret projects, etc).

We're writing constantly. We have the skeletons of at least seven songs done, and three more in refined form. We're taking the approach this time of playing everything live as often as possible before we hit the studio. I've never had the opportunity to do that before, for a variety of reasons, and it seems like a great way to go.

I find that the thrill of live performance really pushes me. I start adding all sorts of little inflections and points of emphasis to make things more dramatic. I just don't think that way in a basement studio – there's just not enough pressure to perform! So I figure this way, we'll be able to go through that process of inspiration and discovery before we commit things to tape.

Recording-wise, this time we're going to track everything live (or close to live). We're thinking about heading up to Electrical Audio in Chicago, as that's their preferred working method so far as I know. I want everything to sound more raw, more real.

What's the most unusual place you've ever played a show or made a recording? How did the qualities of that place affect the show/recording?

This one's easy. I played a show on my last looping tour at my grandmother's retirement home. It was wonderful. I had to turn my amp down so quietly that I was hearing my guitar more acoustically than through the amp. When you're layering 16 guitar parts on top of each other with no

metronome and no undo, it's important to be able to hear yourself, so I was a bit nervous at the lack of monitoring. Thankfully, I had been on the road long enough at that point that I actually pulled off one of my better performances. (It's that whole pressure thing. I work well under pressure.)

The best part was playing for my grandmother, who's one of my favorite people in the world. And the rest of the audience were full of questions, too, like "we can't understand what you're doing! Explain yourself!" It was great. I don't think any of them will go out and buy a Brian Eno disc now or anything, but I'm pretty sure I added a little variety to their routine. They seemed to enjoy it.

In what ways does the place where you live (or places where you have lived), affect the music you create, or your taste in music?

I seem to be including lots of references to places I've lived, places I've been. I've got lines about the Pennsylvania Turnpike in two of my new songs, and there are lots of other references to place throughout my work. But in truth, I think the references are really about people. The places remind me of what it was like to be there with someone. I would never write a song about the Turnpike in the abstract. It's all about relationships, for me. Romantic ones, friends, family. There is no poetry without love. I truly believe that. So new places bring new people, and I think that's the most important thing.

Only two of the songs on *Tourism* are really Kansas City songs, and I'm not saying which to protect the innocent. I'm new to the area, which is ironic, as people have commented that we sound like a Kansas City band. Maybe we do. Perhaps I'm too close to see it.

When was the last time you wrote a song? What can you tell us about it?

I just finished one up this week. It's about road trips. But again, it's about going on road trips with somebody, not about the road trips themselves. In this case, the somebody is my wife. The song sort of charts our growth from poor college kids trying to get away from stress that seemed like a big deal then, but seems very innocent now, through to the present day, when escape still seems like a wonderful, wonderful idea at times.

Ultimately, I want people to appreciate their lives. I want to appreciate my life. So in part I think I'm trying to show that "heavy" things can really be quite silly, yet balance that with the recognition that life is beautiful, life is magnificent, life can be profound.

I think it's profound and beautiful to play Zelda in your room when you're 14 and dying for a crush to call you back (who of course never does) and I think there's some lovely irony when you get yourself into credit card debt so you can go to

New York with your new girlfriend and "escape."

There's some sort of unifying uber-thingie behind what I'm doing, but I'm not sure I've puzzled it out yet. I hope I never really nail it down. As my favorite creative writing teacher said, you don't need an agenda to write. If you have an agenda, you're in trouble already. Or as David Gedge said recently on stage, "Don't blame me, I'm just a conduit."

As you create more music, do you find yourself getting more or less interested in seeking out and listening to new music made by other people...and why do you think that is?



This is a really great question. I'm as interested as ever in finding new music, if not more so, but two things have started to happen. Sometimes I find it harder to find things that I like because more things seem like rehash. Yet at the same time, I find it easier to appreciate a wider range of music because I can hear what *is* unique about any given band. So it's very weird.

Generally, if a band is having fun, or seems to be, I like them. I really, really enjoyed seeing the Unicorns because they reminded me of my friends from high school who had punk bands and would play DIY shows in basements, etc. I loved those shows. I loved the energy, the ridiculous antics, the 17-minute sets of 17 songs.

So with the Unicorns, it had nothing to do with the fact that Pitchfork loved them, it was about them being silly and having fun. And then I saw this band called The Mechanical Boy from somewhere in Texas recently and they blew me away simply because they were really, really well rehearsed. They seemed road-weary, but what inspired me was how hard they were trying.

So in the end, I think it boils down to enthusiasm in any flavor – from grim determination to wild abandon. It's fun if the band is putting something into it. I've also been listening to a lot of Billie Holiday, because it's an awesome antidote when my son is cranky in the car. It's hard to be angsty when you're listening to Billie Holiday.

Lately what musical periods or styles do you find yourself most drawn to as a listener? (Old or new music? Music like yours or different from yours?)

I'm bouncing all over the place. I've been listening to the soul station on XM radio, and I've been listening to the KCRW Morning Becomes Eclectic podcasts. I've been digging Bob Dylan's Theme Time Radio Hour, because he gets really obscure. He did a whole show on songs about baseball.

When it comes to guitar rock (more in the vein of what I'm doing) I just can't get tired of The Wedding Present, Weezer

and Teenage Fanclub. I don't listen to them often, but I'm never disappointed when the iPod decides to shuffle them in. And I've been going back to listen to their influences, like Big Star and The Birthday Party.

My favorite bands tend to be band's bands. Bands that other bands admire, but who never really made it that big (Weezer doesn't fit, obviously). A lot of it is about the guitar sound/approach for me. I like a lot of XTC and Cure stuff for that reason. I like music that's considered, even if that contemplation comes in the form of searing blasts of colossal guitar noise (e.g., The Wedding Present.) I think Pavement were a contemplative band. I think they were intentional, even as they seemed to personify slack.

Name a band or musician, past or present, who you flat-out LOVE and think more people should be listening to. What's one of your all-time favorite recordings by this band/musician?

Namelessnumberheadman. They will think I'm gimpy for mentioning them, as they are friends of mine, but I got to know them initially because I find their music so inspiring. They are truly, truly talented and write amazing music. Their new album will slay yr face, if that's possible with mostly-acoustic instrumentation and brush-played drums. It's going to be really, really good. I hope they are able to keep playing together for a long, long time, because they're still growing and show no signs of stopping.

What's the saddest song you've ever heard?

Teenage Fanclub's "if I never see you again" is such a lovely, sad, beautiful lament of a song. It sounds like Christmas. Like looking in on the Christmas of a life lost. I wanted to play it at my wedding, it's so beautiful, but it was just too sad. So there you go. And actually, the original demo version of Whitford's "Until he comes home" stacks up there. But nobody has heard that except for me.

To check out the rest of the Q&As, [click here](#).