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Combo cures "Hangover" with air of soul

BY **STEPHEN BOVE** • STAFF WRITER • DECEMBER 30, 2008

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It hits the head like a three-finger toast of Four Roses — or the cracked wail of some bygone jazz cat slinking across a long-forgotten frequency.

Whatever the metaphor, the sound of Like Trains & Taxis — Chris Harris, Owen Susman and Mike Del Priore — is a bracing wind of soul sure to shake the Jersey Shore's lily-white waters straight down to the bedrock.

"I think — or at least hope — that the relative uniqueness of our sound will work in our favor," says Harris, the band's lead songwriter, vocalist and piano player. "We get a lot of enthusiastic reactions on that premise. A lot of people come up to us and say, "Hey, I really haven't heard anything like that before. It reminds me of a bunch of different things, but the things it reminds me of don't necessarily connect.'"

The New Brunswick indie/soul/groove combo will play The Saint on New Year's Day as part of Rick Barry's seventh annual Holiday Hangover event, along with The New Rick Barrys, Glen Burtnik and No Wine For Kittens, and will follow with performances at the Downtown in Red Bank Jan. 14 and George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick Jan. 31.

Having already released its debut EP on Dec. 12 at The Delancey in New York City and set to kick off the new year with an exhaustive tour spanning from Asbury to Atlanta to Detroit, the band, which formed about a year ago and just recently began playing before live audiences, understands the reality of keeping swift to stay alive.

"Owen and I were playing together for a little while as a duo before we found a drummer. At the time, I was getting comfortable performing in general; it's not really something I had done before — as a singer, as a front man," Harris says. "I'd played in bands as a piano player for a large portion of my life, but never as the focal point. So it was good that Owen and I had the time to go around as a duo and do coffee shops for a while, which allowed me to gain some confidence. It wasn't until we found Mike that we really got our wheels underneath us and were able to start moving forward.

"Real life exists for me, as it does for the other members of this band. I don't think we're really at an age to pussyfoot around, kind of tow the line of it being a hobby that we're all kind of interested in," he added. "If we're going to do it, we need to do it as efficiently as possible and as seriously as possible to really know whether we have a shot at it. That way, if it doesn't work out, we can say we actually tried, instead of "Hey we played a bunch of basements in New Brunswick and did some DIY-style tours but never really tried to make a go at it.' If we're going to invest the time, we should do it 100 percent and do it as seriously and professionally as possible. That'll allow people to take us seriously as we grow and develop and learn how to make good records."

If Tom Waits' sprawling, cacophonous blues were to cross the ardent grooves of Stevie Wonder on an illicit corner of Tin Pan Alley, it might scratch the surface of what this band's self-titled six-song debut is all about.



Chris Harris, Mike Del Priore and Owen Susman, a.k.a. Like Trains & Taxis, will play The Saint New Year's Day.

RICK BARRY'S SEVENTH ANNUAL HOLIDAY HANGOVER with Like Train & Taxis, The New Rick Barrys, Glen Burtnik and No Wine For Kittens 7 p.m. Thursday The Saint, 601 Main St., Asbury Park

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"It's not a conscious thing, there's no real thought like "Hey, let's try and be like Stevie Wonder; let's remind people of Donny Hathaway or any other soul singer from the '60s and '70s. Let's try to do something that's purposefully jazzy and remind people of that." " he said.

"The songs are what they are. They're songs before they fit into a genre, and the sound of it — or what we call the sound of it — is kind of an afterthought. I think we wholeheartedly embrace the unconscious influences that come through our music and feel like there is no reason to be intimidated by the stature of the people that we may or not be compared to."

In an age of rising anti-intellectualism, where calling oneself "artist" is rapidly becoming taboo, Harris holds firm his belief of composing and performing as a pursuit of virtue.

"Coming from a world that's very much different and divided from the pop music realm, I've always kind of leaned back on the idea of creating something that doesn't necessarily fit into any structural idea," he said. "You look to people like The Beatles, who were very instrumental in doing that the second-half of their career; people like Radiohead, for a more contemporary model; even people on the soul side, like Stevie Wonder in the early '70s, where it really seemed like he was trying to do something — with a record like "Innervisions' — like he was trying to say something bigger than just "I want to make a song that makes me feel good and makes other people feel good too.' "

Harris says he approaches the creative process organically, drawing from a spectrum of inspirations spanning from contemporary post-indie back to the American abstract expressionism movement.

"For me, each song is an individual challenge," says Harris. "Generally speaking, I sit down at the piano or with the guitar; even though most of the songs are piano-based, a great deal of them were written on the guitar first and transposed over to the piano, just because I can play that instrument a lot better and feel a lot more comfortable with it.

"But there's really a sense of discovery with the progression that comes naturally, whether I hear it beforehand or I just place my hands on the piano, and that's what comes out," he said. "It makes me feel something, and I'm forced to understand what it is. In that way it's kind of like abstract expressionism. People like Jackson Pollock, who would throw some paint at a canvas, look at it, and just by looking at it they'd start to understand what it means to them. And they constructed on those grounds. In writing some of the songs, I really take that challenge seriously in terms of trying to explore not just what a song is and can be structurally in a pop sense, but the way the lyrics and the structure and the arrangement intertwine and the composite picture that it makes afterward."

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