

TAKE FIVE
CAMERON MCGILL

BY JIM DUNN AND LAURA HAMLETT

Chicago-based singer-songwriter Cameron McGill recorded an album (*Stories of the Knife and the Back*) of lyrically rich pop-bordering-on-alt-country gems. "Home is where the heartache is," he sings—and there isn't one of us that hasn't known that feeling. Watching him live is captivating, as he comes off as one of those borderline geniuses. A talented musician—McGill plays both piano and guitar, often both at once by looping the guitar sounds—he's entirely absorbed in the act; eyes closed most of the time, it's as if the audience has ceased to exist. Talking to him, though, is another story, as he is always conscious of being both interesting and entertaining.

Do you tour with a full band?

I've done a couple different setups with the past record. I was playing guitar and piano, and had a cello and violin player occasionally. That works really well for some of the songs on the last record. I wasn't always able to afford them for out of town stuff, so mostly it was in Chicago. Most touring has been either solo or with a keyboard player.

You seem to be able to create your own band onstage when you're alone.

I was like, OK, I'm going to be having to go out right now and can't really afford to bring people with me; what are the things that I can do to make it more interesting instead of just being the classic straight guy? You know, a guy walks up with an acoustic guitar, whatever people expect a singer-songwriter to be. I don't feel that the songs I've been writing lend themselves to that kind of treatment anyway.

I'm trying to make it more spastic—the energy that I feel the lyrics have, and the vocal melodies—and just build a little bit more of the melody and structure. I'm starting to play more piano, just to change it up.

How do you describe your music?

When people ask me that, the first thing I will say is that I spend a lot of time on what the songs are about, on the lyrics. The kind of melodies that I like came from listening to a lot of Bob Dylan, Beach Boys, Simon & Garfunkel, Neil Young—basically my dad's records when I was growing up. It just has a real emphasis on melody and lyrics. It's pop music in the original sense of the word. When you say the word "pop" these days, people immediately think Britney Spears. It's kind of blasphemous. When I think pop, I think Beatles; that's the first thing that comes to my mind.

You did a lot of your recording at a friend's apartment, and then studio time at night or whenever it was available. How was this method on your creative process?

It was a strain. We started the record at my friend's apartment, doing a lot of the tracks like piano and guitars and stuff. We had a spec deal to do studio time whenever they had it available, which was very nice. But it was difficult to keep a lot of the continuity. I think, mentally and emotionally, I was just kind of strung out trying to keep everything going like I thought it should be going. When I make the next record, it will be completely different from how I made the first one. But at the time, that's really the option that I had to take.

Is there anything else you can see yourself doing besides music?

No. I thought about that a couple years ago and came to the pretty quick decision that



there isn't anything else that I would really enjoy doing nearly as much as playing music. I don't really see it as something I want to even give myself an option to do.

Next up for you is an EP, following which you'll record your second full-length. Will it differ measurably from *Stories*?

I'm going to have a friend of mine that played keyboards on the first record, Christian Cullen, produce this next one with me. We really work well together; it really feels like what I'm going for. With the first [album], I was all over the place, trying to get everything together. Musically, there's been a lot more songs on the piano and lyrics are probably going to continue to be more in-depth with more story songs, more characters. It's so seldom that you see those characters anymore. I don't know where they are; maybe somebody kidnapped them.

Cameron McGill appears with Rachel Yamagata—both as an opening act and playing guitar in her band—at Blueberry Hill's Duck Room October 10.



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