

# the Sea and Cake

## CAR ALARM



**Thrill Jockey Records - September 2008**

The exciting sound of a well-oiled band. *Car Alarm* is The Sea and Cake's eighth full-length record. It is bracing, like the surge of wasabe on sweet sushi, like the slap of cool water on a diving body, like the head-rush of a rollercoaster just leaving summit. Bracing music is most often encountered in concert. Only the heaviest hitters have translated the live thrill into the recording studio. Think of the great working bands, the Charles Mingus Quintet, the John Coltrane Quartet, the Meters or the Minutemen. For them, there was no gaping chasm between the studio and the road; the studio was just another stop, a gig, a continuous part of the flow of playing and working and creating together.

*Car Alarm* is the sound of a well-oiled band. Heavy hitters. Listen to the intricate intertwining strings of Sam Prekop and Archer Prewitt and you'll hear the frontline of a working unit that has moved seamlessly from the stage to the studio and back. Historically, The Sea and Cake stayed the course since forming in Chicago in 1993, but over the last couple of years they have pulled in even tighter, recording hot and fast on the heels of a busy performance schedule without breaking for other projects. The sense of trust and communication that is key to a working band – particularly in the rhythm section, where drummer John McEntire and bassist Eric Claridge create their intimate alchemy – is cultivated over the long haul, by means of an epoxy bond and preternatural antennae. Stop working together, and those connections go dormant, hibernate; keep on trucking, and they deepen and get sharper, allowing the band to reach for new things, experiment freely, evolve and develop and grow. The ground doesn't have to be prepared; the canvas is already primed, ready for the first brushstroke.

The aim with *Car Alarm* was to follow up quickly on its precursor, the somewhat stripped down *Everybody*. Prekop says the band wanted to make a record that felt like they had never stopped playing, a continuously limbered up ensemble that parlayed its last tour into new material. They started working on it right after an Australian tour in March, and finished it after a miraculous three-month gestation. If the usual process in pop music is to make a record and then breathe life into it on the road, this flips that presumption on its head, starting with a vital, pulsing set-list on disc; what heights they'll take the new songs to in concert only remains to be seen.

Where in the past, The Sea and Cake has disbursed between records to allow each member their individual pursuits – Prekop and Prewitt's artwork and solo projects, McEntire's production at his SOMA Studio and work with Tortoise, Claridge's alternate identity as a painter – in this case they didn't disband, but dove straight into *Car Alarm*. The quickness reflects a personal urgency, too, given the imminent delivery of Prekop's firstborn. Thoughts of fatherhood may lend a kind of optimistic air to the record. It has the breezy, open, crisp sound that The Sea and Cake have spent 15 years crafting, but *Car Alarm* also has a palpable edge. That's the edge of people who know each other well enough to push a bit harder, who aren't worried about ruffling each other's feathers or trying something different, difficult, intuitive, trusting. Something bracing. Here 'tis.

-- John Corbett

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**Thrill Jockey**



**Sea and Cake**  
**Oui**  
 [Thrill Jockey; 2000]  
 Rating: 9.0

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The Sea and Cake have never trafficked in revolutions. Those quick to decry a foolish consistency forget that there's an angel in the details-- an angel of our better natures, let's say, urging the hard elegance over the easy noise. To charge The Sea and Cake with rehashing the same album amounts to deriding Monet for painting the same haystacks. Not only is it wrong, it has simply missed the point. It's strange that an album as demure as *Oui* will have such a bitterly polarizing effect; the skirmish over the fine line between continuity and paralysis seem so irrelevant to the grace and sophistication of this work.

This album's October 3rd release date already presents a small parable for *Oui*; it's a day consecrated to Saint Radiohead. But superficially, the day marks the release of two eagerly anticipated albums; it concludes a three-year absence of serious studio output from both bands. By way of contrast, *Kid A* puts its predecessors through the dream cuisinart; it turns oedipally on its forebears. *Oui*, however, recalls past Sea and Cake albums like lost loves: fondness tempered with regret. Some will search *Oui* for signs of the radical innovation and disruption that lend *Kid A* its oneiric vitality, but they'll search in vain. Rather, the studied affirmative of *Oui* is sober in the face of the past, almost sad and not quite dreaming.

The Sea and Cake were born middle-aged, their respective musical puberties farmed out among a handful of preceding bands. The self-titled debut always sounded seasoned and precise. Its various musical styles are fused with such mastery and deliberation that one would never have believed that the band was intended as a one-off project. 1995's *Nassau* regressed into a newfound adolescence: Sam Prekop yowled; John McEntire set aside the brushes for hard sticks; Archer Prewitt's rhythmic strum dominated the album. Remember the sloppy jangle of "Nature Boy" or the snaky garage fusion of "A Man Who Never Sees a Pretty Girl That He Doesn't Love Her a Little", the churchy farfisa in "The Cantina"? But even amidst the regression and brilliant irresponsibility of *Nassau* sat the shattering seaside dolor of "Parasol", recalling an earlier clarity, and virtually anticipating the grievous composure of *Oui*.

**FILTER**  
 MAGAZINE

**THE SEA AND CAKE**  
*Everybody*

90%



THRILLJOCKEY

*Everybody* welcomes us back into the modern art museum that exists in the mind of the Sea and Cake frontman Sam Prekop. This is the sound of modern architecture, of dim lighting, clean lines and the jazz set (a mode that permeates tSaC's aural milieu). But the trip through the museum is different this season. The new exhibit is much more organic and live (vivid pieces like "Up on Crutches" or "Crossing Line"), the broad strokes are made with acoustic guitar, brushed drums and loud fuzz lead, and there's a noticeable lack of glinting electronics. But this is no "mature" renaissance throwback, my fellow patrons of the arts, via other works such as "Coconut" and "Left On," it's clear that their art can still blow your modern mind like they did with 1997's wunderpiece *The Fawn*. The parking sucks, but this museum is the shit. **MICHAEL BUTER**

HONORABLE TO MUSIC, FILM AND CULTURE  
**Paste**

**THE SEA AND CAKE**

*Everybody*

[THRILL JOCKEY] ★★★★★

*Chicago band pens top-notch songs to match its always-impressive music.*

Indie-rock supergroup The Sea and Cake is always easy on the ears. Their tasteful jazz-tinged rock—with its touches of samba and West African pop and Sam Prekop's impossibly airy



voice floating on top—always sounds nice at the very least. But with their previous records, *Oui* and *Ove*

*Bebevo*, "nice" is pretty much as far as they got; both were rhythmically sharp and impeccably played, but the tunes seemed to hover squarely in the band's comfort zone, making listeners wonder if Prekop might be saving his best stuff for his more impressive solo records. The pleasant-but-dull trend is happily reversed on *Everybody*, which deviates little in style but finds the songwriting drastically improved. Sleek neo-disco vocal hooks ("Crossing Line"), bubbly progressions inspired by the golden age of singer/songwriters ("Coconut" isn't a Harry Nilsson

cover, but he would've dug it) and typically nimble instrumental interplay ("Exact to Me") add up to the band's best collection in a decade.

*Mark Richardson*

**The Washington Post**

THE SEA AND CAKE *Everybody* Thrill Jockey THE ZINCS *Black Pompadour* Thrill Jockey

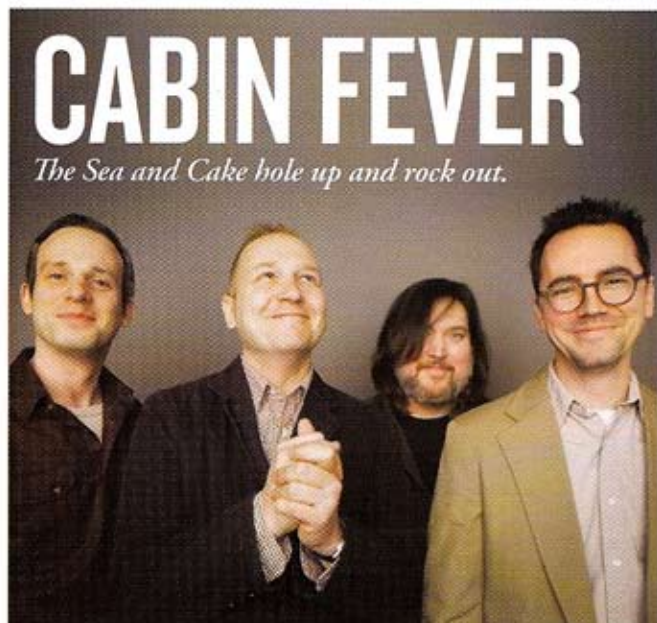
FOLLOWING THE STRICTURES of post-rock, the Sea and Cake has spent more than a decade avoiding anything that sounds too mainstream or familiar. On its new CD, "Everybody," however, the Chicago quartet slips "Up on Crutches's" sunny pop-soul recalls early-'70s Todd Rundgren. "Lightning" turns the album's title into a folk-rock chorale that resembles an all-male Fleetwood Mac and "Left On" features heavy distortion and feedback.

Some may find such lapses unforgivable, but they're among the reasons "Everybody" is the band's most enjoyable release.

Singer-guitarist Sam Prekop and his cohorts haven't forsaken the lounge cadences and jazz chords designed to keep rock at bay -- and to complement Prekop's lightweight tenor. The musicians also still toy, if only gently, with song structure: The chorus doesn't always arrive when expected, and though none of these songs is especially long, some vamp idly for a minute or two. One track, the jaunty "Exact to Me," even flirts with Afropop. None of it sounds forced, but then it wouldn't.

Breeziness is one post-rock quality the Sea and Cake shows no sign of abandoning, even during the album's noisy bits.

# HARP



## CABIN FEVER

*The Sea and Cake hole up and rock out.*

AFTER BEING TREATED TO FOUR ALBUMS BY THE SEA AND CAKE during the band's first three years together, fans can be forgiven for thinking the guys have been slacking lately. The group's latest album, *Everybody*, is only its third in the last decade. While the album is full of the intricate, jazzy dream-pop the band is known for, many of the electronic flourishes that adorned the Sea and Cake's last album, 2003's *One Bedroom*, now take a backseat to a more guitar-focused attack. Singer/guitarist Sam Prekop talked to *Harp* about the new sound, the benefits of recording in isolation and what the hell took them so long.

**You've called *Everybody* your most "rock" album yet—what made you want to unleash the rock 'n' roll animal this time around?**

We're always trying to counteract the last record. I guess we thought the last record was a little too electronically oriented.

**How has the band changed during the time off?**

It's weird because I've made solo records during the last two breaks. But [guitarist] Archer Prewitt is usually involved with those, so that keeps the continuum going. If we didn't keep working in that capacity, I'm not sure what would happen.

**You guys holed up for a week in an isolated studio in Benton Harbor, Mich. How did you stop yourselves from re-enacting *The Shining*?**

Benton Harbor is sort of a creepy town in that it's been abandoned. At some point, all the industry and businesses left, so it's like a small-town ghetto. Somehow, I didn't believe it was going to be as remote as it was described to me. But it was a good thing because we had no other options but to work on the record. There were absolutely no distractions. HAL BIENSTOCK

## BLENDER

THE ULTIMATE MUSIC MAGAZINE

MARCH 2003

# AP

### THE SEA AND CAKE

ONE BEDROOM ○○○

THRILL JOCKEY

Post-rock "supergroup" lunges, with glockenspiels and piccolos in hand, into smooth electropop

They're led by Tortoise alpha male John McEntire and Sam Prekop from cerebral pioneers Shrimp Boat, but TSAC sound like the only Chicago post-rockers with ambitions beyond turning into Weather Report. Their sixth album is a fizzling delight, jettisoning previous jazzy inclinations in favor of a gorgeous electronic pitter-patter that sets off Prekop's velvety, mourning vocals. The luxurious "Mr. F" is MOR by any other name, scuffed up deliciously by McEntire's trademark wheezing synths; "Four Corners" sounds like Krautrockers Neu! if they had ever decided to record an album of elevator music. Closing with a sensitive, Philly soul-style cover of David Bowie's "Sound and Vision," *One Bedroom* shows that Chicago avant-gardists can appeal as much to the heart as the head.

JOHN MULLIN

### THE SEA AND CAKE

★★★★

*Everybody*

I'm pickin' up good vibrations.



The album cover for *Everybody*, the thrilling new offering by indie supergroup the Sea and Cake, shows jagged and asymmetrical tiles forming smooth flooring. And like those tiles, the intersecting guitars of Sam Prekop and Archer Prewitt, paired with the narcotic dream of a rhythm section of bassist Eric Claridge and drummer John McEntire—united now for over a decade—interlock just as smoothly. This machine-tooled precision stitches each member so tightly together that the seams never show, leaving only their signature warm glide of elemental recombinant pop. It's also their most "rock" album to date, with opener "Up On Crutches" goosed by a post-rock double axe attack. *Everybody* has something for, well, everybody. (THRILL JOCKEY; thrilljockey.com) Erick Haight



## CRITIQUES

### The Sea and Cake

*One Bedroom*

The cover shows off Chicago's famous skyline, but you'd never know it. It looks more like a groundline: A thick fog obscures the high landmarks, and yet the view down here is breathtaking. The photo hints at the music on offer: artful, minimalist, with a controlled moodiness one usually associates with the Brits. Chicago's Sam Prekop and his mates give Anglo pop a lo-fi twist—a dialed-down version of Bowie's "Sound & Vision"; soft jangles that recall the Smiths if Morrissey were slightly bound



and gagged. This isn't downer rock; it's music that looks to the heavens but keeps its feet blissfully on the ground.

—JIM NELSON

# Less Post, More Rock

On their new album the Sea and Cake get (relatively) straightforward.

By Miles Raymer



Archer Prewitt, Sam Prekop, John McEntire, and Eric Claridge

I've never had much use for the Sea and Cake. Their records have always been too mellow and smooth, the kind of thing I imagine people play at dinner parties, and I don't really throw dinner parties. Chicago post-rock and its cousins can engage me on an intellectual level—they assimilate bits of so many different styles that it's interesting to try to parse them all—but I prefer the more bodily lizard-brain stimulation provided by punk and dance music.

So my reaction to the Sea and Cake's new seventh record, *Everybody* (Thrill Jockey), which the band will celebrate with two shows at the Empty Bottle on Thursday, caught me by surprise. Maybe I've mellowed out enough myself to hear something I was missing before, or maybe there's something new in the music—a lot of critics agree that this is the band's most direct, rock-leaning record yet—but it blew me away right from the start.

The sound of the opening track, "Up on Crutches," isn't much different from what I think of as basic Sea and Cake: genteel and gently funny, with front man Sam Prekop singing breathily about something I can't quite sort out. The differences in texture are subtle—fewer obvious overdubs, less studio fussiness, more reliance on the band's customary stage instrumentation (guitars, bass, and drums, as opposed to synths or programmed percussion). The dramatic changes on *Everybody* are in the structures and gestures that make up the songs: for the first time, they make generous use of traditional rock tropes. "Up on Crutches" begins with a bit of tension, a pleasant dissonance between the instruments and the vocals—a technique the Sea and Cake has toyed with before—and then halfway through, the chords resolve and the group executes a classic major-key pop progression. Any other band would've used that moment to blow the song up into a giant catharsis, but Prekop and company barely adjust their volume, allowing the music to bloom naturally and elegantly. Their willingness to hold back and let the music flow around them makes the moment profoundly satisfying, despite the absence of fireworks—and *Everybody* is full of moments like that.

## The Sea and Cake

**WHEN** Thu 5/31, 7 PM (with Euphonia) and 10 PM (with the Zines)  
**WHERE** Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western  
**PRICE** \$20, \$18 in advance  
**INFO** 773-276-3600 or 866-468-3401

company barely adjust their volume, allowing the music to bloom naturally and elegantly. Their willingness to hold back and let the music flow around them makes the moment profoundly satisfying, despite the absence of fireworks—and *Everybody* is full of moments like that.

Prekop is just as chill in person as

you'd imagine from his singing. He's 42, but the 20 years he's spent in the relative sanctuary of the indie-rock scene have allowed him to grow older without becoming too much of an adult. When he talks about the creative process that led to *Everybody*, he's simultaneously articulate and spaced, which makes him sound very much like the art student he was in 1985, when he started his first band, Shrimp Boat. "In general, the consensus seems that it's not really a rock record, but it's one that only the Sea and Cake would make," he says.

For 2003's *One Bedroom*, says Prekop, "We came up with much more open-ended, loose ideas and then let them evolve more in the studio." (Long gaps between Sea and Cake records aren't unusual—Prekop and guitarist Archer Prewitt put out solo records between *One Bedroom* and *Everybody*, and drummer John McEntire stayed busy in Tortoise.) The band spent a total of six weeks making that one, tinkering with their parts during tracking and in some cases recording songs in pieces so they could be edited together in Pro Tools. For the new one, though, "it was decided that the record would come out around this time, and I decided sort of late that we would actually do it. So the timeline was a little more compressed." They spent five days on basic tracks at Key Club in Benton Harbor, Michigan, four or five more on vocals—Prekop is a bit of a perfectionist about his singing—and six mixing at McEntire's studio, Soma, here in town, keeping the Pro Tools fanciness to a minimum. "We acted like a rock band," Prekop says, "got in a room and played the songs and pressed record."

That's not to say *Everybody* doesn't have the satiny sheen of a typical Sea and Cake album. The band has folded all sorts of styles into its music over the years—jazz, electronica, West African highlife—without compromising its core identity, and streamlining the recording process wasn't intended to change that signature sound. Sea and Cake fans might be unwilling to believe him, but Prekop says this consistency is a side effect of the band's limitations as musicians—they can't convincingly re-create other styles in their entirety, so they end up adopting a few distinctive elements from each one instead. "We're not capable of being stylists in a regular sort of sense," he says. "Our skills really expose what we can do."

Prekop began playing in his 20s "on a whim," without any training, on a guitar a friend had given him. The raw excitement of discovering music is something he still

holds dear. "When I started, if it even sounded remotely musical, I was blown away," he says. "There were a lot of years where there was a freakishly magical process that was absolutely mysterious to me as to how it works or it's supposed to function. Being excited all the time. But with experience, you have to work harder to get to that point again."

One thing that the passage of the years hasn't affected is Prekop's singing: his airy voice and straightforward delivery seem untouched by age, and he still sounds naive, almost innocent, no matter what he's singing about. Figuring out what that is can be fairly difficult, though. A recent *New York Times* review suggested that Prekop chooses his words more for sound than sense, resulting in lines like "Fair enough / Exact to me / The fraud's just in," which imply more than they explain. "The words themselves and the sound, it's sort of interchangeable," he clarifies. "The words are important, but it's music first, I guess. I feel like they're endlessly intertwined."

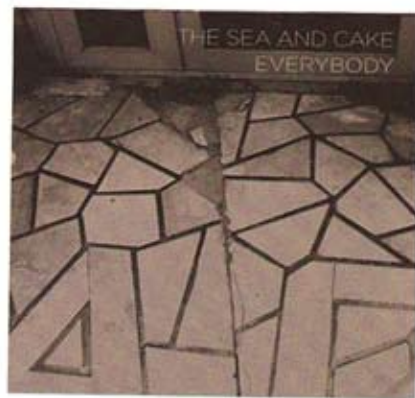
The tone I quoted, "Exact to Me," is the least rock-sounding thing on the new album, with a cyclical tension-release structure instead of a single resolution, but it's also probably my favorite. The guitars are in full high-life mode, showering Eric Claridge's scurrying bass line and McEntire's subtle but amazingly expressive drumming with little flurries of syncopated melody, and Prekop plays the uptight midwestern white dude, like a more mellow David Byrne, singing in as clipped and forceful a style as he seems capable of. (Which is still pretty gentle compared to everyone this side of James Blunt.) Two songs later, though, the band gets back to pop basics with the pleasantly bouncy "Introducing," which could pass for a cover of an obscure track by Tommy James & the Shondells.

Prekop says this sort of variety is what keeps the band going. "Every year," he says, "every record it seems to me to take more work to get just a certain point where it's going to stay interesting, and to feel like you've achieved something better than you did before." As he explains it, the key to enjoying making records, even after 20 years, is simple: "You have to think that you made the best record you did," he says, "or else you'll never finish." Keep going that way for long enough, it seems, and from time to time you actually will make your best record. ■

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THE SEA AND CAKE:  
*EVERYBODY*.

Recording by Brian Paulson.

Thrill Jockey 186 (CD and LP).

After recording and touring under their individual names (but still collaborating with each other), Archer Prewitt and Sam Prekop return following a four-year hiatus to The Sea and Cake with drummer/percussionist John McEntire (who kept busy with Tortoise, Stereolab, and others in his Soma Studios) and bassist Eric Claridge (an active oil painter and illustrator).

Any lingering doubts about the pop fundamentals of these supposed avatars of post-rock are dispatched post-haste in the strumming acoustic guitars, melodic bass lines, reverberant electric guitars, and insistent drums of the album-opening "Up on Crutches" and lilting second track "Too Strong." Singer/guitarists Prekop and Prewitt pick up where Steely Dan's Donald Fagen and Walter Becker left off around 1976, adding attractive elements of prog (almost everybody doubles on keyboards), bossa nova, and jittery juju-music guitar lines to support breathy vocals singing about who-knows-what.

The sonics, overseen by Brian Paulson (Slint, Wilco) in a relatively live studio setting, are as crisp as the lyrics are cryptic. As with Steely Dan and *Smile*-era Beach Boys, sophisticated, indeed luscious pop sound—supported here by study, complex drumming and a tightly gathered, crystal-clear mix—trumps obtuse meaning. **Derk Richardson**

**Further Listening:** Sam Prekop: *Who's Your New Professor*; Stereolab: *Dots and Loops*

Chicago-based band the Sea and Cake doesn't rely on flashy instrumentals or stage antics to make great live music. Though the members' instruments are fully plugged in, their ideas come from an organic place, creating a sense of wide-open space in the midst of a cluttered city. Escapism is one of the best features of live music, and the Sea and Cake make it easy to get there.

Thursday night's sold-out late show at the Empty Bottle displayed the best of the band's push and pull with rock 'n' roll, a textured set that traversed the beauty of electrically driven harmonies, shattering rhythms and intense creativity.

The tour supports the band's latest album "Everybody," released in May on the local Thrill Jockey label. It is its first album since the band went on break in 2004. Although the band has taken its sound in a new, harder rock direction, it hasn't sacrificed the intellectual flare that trademarks its music.

The lineup includes Sam Prekop (guitars and vocals), Archer Prewitt (guitar), John McEntire (drums) and Erik Claridge (bass). Each member uses relatively minimal sounds and melodies. One man plays one instrument at a time. These days, that could categorize them as a "no-frills band" (and check out Prekop playing a guitar that looks like it's been beaten to hell and back; there is no changing of guitars on every song).

But the Sea and Cake layers its sounds so they come together in a well-balanced noise that evokes an immediate emotional response. The emotion comes on strong, especially because of the underlying tension throughout the music, born of each member's contribution to the overall sound. The live show gives an audible voice to the band's inner intellectual wrangling, a vocal meeting of the minds through skins and strings.

With all this going on, the band doesn't need to provide any visual component, though there are two particularly great things to watch. The first is Prekop, who punctuates the music with wide-eyed vocal screams whenever the band builds to a breaking point. And McEntire looks completely possessed while he drums, pulling heavy rhythms from the indie rock ether, pushing those rhythms to the forefront of the music.

Together with Prewitt's understated melodic brilliance and Claridge's constant bass grounding, the Sea and Cake makes enough noise to keep you interested but plays only what needs to be played. It's exactly what the music needs.

Also notable was an opening performance from the Zincs, who played a show worthy of a headlining spot. The Zincs continue to tighten their sound, resulting in a finely tuned display that leaves everyone wanting more.

## » DRUM!

### The Sea And Cake Everybody

Thrill Jockey Records

MUSIC Tip by Jason Jurgens

With a three-year absence behind them, indie pop vets The Sea and Cake return to glory with *Everybody*. Featuring members of Chi-town pioneers Shrimp Boat (Sam Prekop and Eric Claridge), The Cocktails (Archer Prewitt), and Tortoise drummer (John McEntire), the Windy City quartet is somewhat of a post-rock supergroup. Their latest album explores a sonic, dreamlike landscape that is often stripped down to the bare essentials, then redefined through whimsical jams ("Exact To Me" and "Left On"), floating bass lines, and Prekop's breathy, whisper-like vocals.

#### DRUMMING

With the vocals as soft as they are, John McEntire does a good job of not overpowering the music. It's like he recorded the drums under a wet tarp.

#### VERDICT

At its core, *Everybody* is a structured jam session. Songs float on an impulse and before you know it, your head is in the clouds.

## REMIX



### THE SEA AND CAKE

#### Everybody (Thrill Jockey)

Chi-towners keep it easy, breezy After a four-year break, The Sea and Cake return to their trademark sound of dreamlike pop tunes that often drift precariously through whimsical jam sessions. But don't go putting on any Birkenstocks; these rock-based jams are for the indie sceners. Structured sessions float on an impulse, and lyrics stay light and poetic. *Everybody* explores a sonic, meditative landscape that is often stripped down to the bare essentials then redefined through delicate jams ("Exact to Me" and "Left On"), floating bass lines and vocalist Sam Prekop's breathy, whisperlike vocals.—Jason Jurgens

★★★★☆

## Top live shows

### The Sea and Cake + Loney, Dear + The Zincs

TimeOut

New York



Webster Hall, Thu 7

The Sea and Cake released its first album in 1993, and spent the next decade tweaking its jazzy rock songs to incorporate complex overdubs and weird electronic sounds. On its new album, *Everybody* (Thrill Jockey), the quartet abandons much of this studio tinkering, regressing to airtight playing reminiscent of Steely Dan. For some bands, such a shift would seem monumental, yet with the Sea and Cake it's hardly even noticeable—a fact due in part to the group's vocalist, Sam Prekop. Despite its association with Chicago's post-rock scene, this band has always been dominated by his soft, apprehensive singing, which he delivers almost as an afterthought. Onstage, the Sea and Cake presents a hermetic sleekness that can seem downright German. Prekop's voice, striving so hard to be unobtrusive that it remains a permanent focal point,

adds that crucial American touch: passive-aggressive behavior.

Loney, Dear stars Emil Svanängen, a Stockholm multi-instrumentalist with a talent for conjuring the sound of a large group. In concert, he is joined by an actual band, giving real musicians the unenviable task of imitating his imagined one. Opening are the Zincs—like the headliners, an unassuming quartet from Chicago (frontman James Elkington is a British expat). Bands like the Zincs can be easy to ignore, especially in New York, where Midwest modesty tends to get lost in the din. It's too bad: The group's recent album, *Black Pompadour* (Thrill Jockey), is elegant and slinky, featuring cerebral lyrics smuggled into pop songs with an admirable lack of fuss.

—Jay Ruttenberg

Loney, Dear also plays Union Hall Sun 10.

## PAPER

### THE SEA AND CAKE

Everybody (Thrill Jockey) Since their inception in the mid-'90s, Chicago indie-pop group

the Sea and Cake have flown slightly below the radar, always avoiding the hype meter, while amassing a genuine following. It's perhaps this sense of being about to break on a mainstream level that encourages the group to craft dreamily brilliant albums every few years that blow all the newer indie-pop records out of the water. *Everybody*, the follow-up to 2003's beloved *One Bedroom*, is no exception, collecting 10 clean, shimmering tracks that resound with the skilled musicianship of singer/guitarist Sam Prekop and his bandmates. "Middlenight" prances and lilts through a haze of plucked guitars, gently chugging beats and Prekop's hushed, aching vocals, while "Exact to Me" offers a more jazzy backdrop, with a swiftly dancing melody juxtaposed with Prekop's quiet moan. The whole effect is a graceful, charming record. The dulcet, compelling songs showcased on this disc make the road of life feel like an effortless jaunt through a sunny meadow. ★ Emily Zemler

TEL-FREE

Entertainment  
WEEKLY



**THE SEA AND CAKE**  
**EVERYBODY**

Thrill Jockey/US/CD

The Sea and Cake rightfully deserve their designation as elder statesmen of the Chicago art-pop landscape. This time out, Sam Prekop and company return in an older, more perceptive incarnation of the band, eschewing the electronic flourishes of past releases for a more classic sound reminiscent of their self-titled debut. The difference here is clearly refinement. Now he has the guitar playing of Archer Prewitt and Sam Prekop sounded so in-sync and sophisticated. And bassist Eric Claridge and drummer John McEntire continue a legacy of stylish understatement. *Everybody* proves there's plenty left in Chicago's prodigal sons. **Steve Marsh**

**THE SEA AND CAKE** *The Fawn* (Thrill Jockey) The latest from this Chicago indie-rock supergroup (Tor-

oise's John McEntire plus former members of Shrimptoad and the Coctails) adds subtle electronics and drum machines to their previous albums' richly textured mix of jazzy guitar, smooth electric piano, and ambling drums. Full of airy, spacious grooves, *The Fawn* is as graceful as its namesake. **A-** —*RB*

The New York Times

TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 2003

ROCK REVIEW

*A Short Leash Creates a Tense Groove*

By KELEFA SANNEH

If the Sea and Cake doesn't sound like a typical jam band, it's because the group has one accessory that most jam bands lack and many could use: a short leash. The musicians often take off in unexpected directions but they don't go very far. After a few steps, the tether pulls taut, and the whole band runs in place — settling into a tense, stationary groove — before changing direction and moving back the other way. After a few twists and turns, the songs end.

Some fans might be horrified to hear the Sea and Cake described as a jam band, even a modified one. The group records for the Chicago-based indie-rock label Thrill Jockey, which released the sixth Sea and Cake album, "One Bedroom," in January. And the people who filled the Bowery Ballroom on Thursday, for the second date of the group's three-night stand, didn't look like Phish fans.

Still, the Sea and Cake shares strengths and weaknesses with its jam-band counterparts. Its leader, Sam Prekop, has a breathy voice that only hints at melody. But he's also a great bandleader and guitarist, so the group sounded best when he let the tricky chord changes do the singing.

This is a group that has figured out how to reconcile breezy grooves with restless playing. During an older song, "The Biz," Mr. Prekop unleashed a scabbly guitar solo that seemed to consist of nothing but wrong notes. But he seemed to soothe his instrument as he played it, until he had settled back into the theme.

Some older songs used high, nimble guitar lines that hinted at souks, the Congolese genre. Many of the newer songs were built on a sophisticated kind of strumming. Mr. Prekop often concentrated on a single chord at a time, using a precise combination of upstrokes and down-

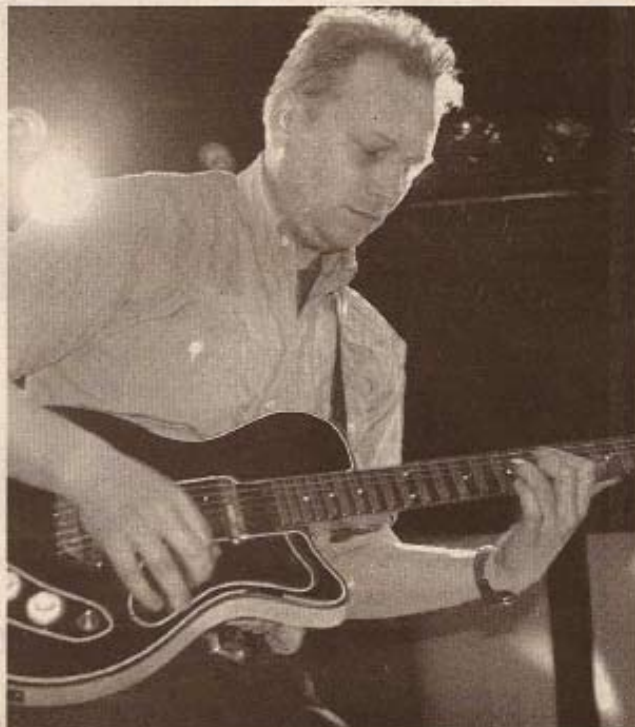


Photo by Roger Sfor The New York Times

Sam Prekop, leader of the Sea and Cake, at the Bowery Ballroom.

strokes to create a beat while the bassist Eric Claridge played the rhythm, and the drummer John McEntire added counterrhythms and fills.

There were times when the group's limited dynamic range seemed like a handicap, times when you wished the musicians would snap their leash and go tearing off toward the horizon. But if concertgoers really wanted to hear the band stretch out, they had to spend a bit

more money.

Downstairs, the group was selling a new EP, "Glass," which includes a nine-minute version of "Hotel Tell," a track from "One Bedroom." The new version is a remix by the visionary electronic producer Carl Craig, who adds a sharp techno beat and a few groggy sound effects, and then makes a break for it, reducing the song to a simple rhythmic pattern that seems to last forever.

URB



**THE SEA AND CAKE**  
**Everybody**  
★★★★  
Well-rested and ready  
for action

[Thrill Jockey] Opener "Up On Crutches" brings a focused urgency that sets the tone for much of what's to follow on *Everybody*. In fact, this Chicago quartet's first effort in four years doesn't show any ill

effects from the layoff. Their arrangements are tidy as ever and the disc's energized pop sounds like it came together on the stage rather than the studio. As the case with every Sea and Cake album, it sounds deceptively simple, but tracks like "Too Strong," "Coconut" and standout "Exact to Me" squeeze layers of breezy guitars and insistent rhythms into tight spaces. Without forgetting what they learned along the way, Sam Prekop, Archer Prewitt, John McEntire and Erik Claridge—who got their name when someone misunderstood their desired name, The C in Cake—went back to their roots and seem refreshed as they bring a crisp edge to their previous styles. For the first time since their eponymous debut, they brought in an outside producer, and the choice of studio ace Brian Paulson seems like a perfect fit.  
**Noah Levine**

## Street-corner talkin'

Communication is easy with Sea and Cake, Aluminum Group

By Greg Kot

TRIBUNE ROCK CRITIC

With stealth and subtlety substituting for bombast and star posturing, *The Sea and Cake* has quietly become a band of international renown. The Chicago quartet is revered by a worldwide cult and capable of selling 50,000 copies of each release—despite a marketing budget that is the rock equivalent of an 8-year-old's allowance.

The veteran quartet is an indie-rock supergroup of sorts, combining former or current personnel from Tortoise, the Coctails and Shrimp Boat, three of the more notable bands to call Chicago home in the last 15 years. At Park West on Wednesday, *The Sea and Cake* communicated with the ease of four musicians who have developed an unspoken vocabulary over a decade of playing together.

The guitars of Sam Prekop and Archer Prewitt chattered as though they were having an animated street-corner conversation on "Jacking the Ball" and "Afternoon Speaker," their six-string voicings suggesting be-bop and bossa nova as much as rock. As a singer, Prekop's voice has an airy, relaxed tone; he prefers to sigh, purr, slur and hum, enunciating selectively, biding his time. "I'm waiting till the winter dies, skillfully," he sang on "The Leaf."

The melodies wanted to float away, but drummer John McEntire would not let go of them, his gliding tempos picking up force as necessary, his precision work on the cymbals a stunning demonstration of how percussion can be used not only to propel songs, but to color and shape them. Equally impressive was Eric Claridge, who straddled melody and rhythm so artfully that his bass lines were like songs in themselves.

Though the band was unable to reproduce the gorgeous orchestrations of its most recent album, "Oui," guest multi-instrumentalist



Photos for the Tribune by Kevin Tanaka

Archer Prewitt performs with The Sea and Cake at Park West.

## Rock review

Dave Crawford brought a fresh perspective to the new songs on keyboards and trumpet. Having worked with Prewitt on his solo projects, Crawford entered the conversation as though he were the group's long lost fifth member.

## ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2007

## DOUGH-EYED SOUL

Released after more than a year-long recording hiatus, *The Sea and Cake*'s latest effort, *The Feast*, is a small masterpiece of grooveiness, at once beautiful, lumpy, and slightly silly. Oozing, sliding, and bubbling out of your speakers, it's a kind of sonic equivalent to low-temp bubble. Which is not to imply that *The Feast* or *The Sea and Cake* are a parody camp experience; actually, you get the sense that the guys enjoy this stuff in a truly genuine way, and you can too.

*The Sea and Cake* first got started in the fall of 1993, at a time when Chicago music was dominated by two forces—an alt-rock trio (Smashing Pumpkins, et al.) and various WuTrox bands (almost everybody Al Jourgensen produced). But bubbling just beneath the surface was a nascent scene of cerebral pop aficionados—people with more soul than Sabbath in their album collections. Among them were longtime members of Shrimp Boat (guitarist and vocalist Sam Prekop, bassist Eric Claridge) and former Coctails keyboard player and guitarist Archer Prewitt who got together with percussionist/producer John McEntire (who plays drums for like-minded bands Tortoise, Gaster del Sol, and Red Krayola) to produce a different kind of pop transcendence.

Learning guitar-heavy instrumental attack and angst-ridden vocals behind, *The Sea and Cake* blend jazy melodies and bebop-inflected bossa nova cool and cocktail-garden-perimeter noodling into elegantly crafted pop tunes. On *The Feast*'s "There You Are," you get a skipshod-down, syzygy, old-style soul groove, perfect for doing all the things you currently do to, say, Marvin Gaye or John. To accompany it, Prekop provides patented indie-style lyrics (shamed and impressionistic, and occasionally unintelligible). His only break with that tradition a deeper falsetto, managing to summon up the spirit of Al Green (that falsetto) and Stephen Malkmus (tantalizing gibberish) simultaneously. Let us think they're getting too smart for their (or your) own good, on the first track they remind you that it's a "sporting life" after all. Then they sprinkle their myriad influences with enough "salsa" to make sure you don't forget what fun is all about.

—MARK VAN DE WALLE

## THE SEA AND CAKE

*The Sea and Cake*

Thrill Jockey

The Coctails and Shrimp Boat have been walking softly under the big schtick of Chicago's loud, fast ruling elite for years. Both bands make fragile, omnivorous pop that sends them begging at tables as far flung as the Velvet Underground, Isaac Hayes, and Hal Russell. The Coctails, for their part, foreshadowed and mastered the exotica revival long before Combustible Edison, while Shrimp Boat's records payed an unlikely tribute to Ornette

Coleman with overweening but lovely stabs at harmolodic pop.

That said, don't expect to hear much of this on the *Sea and Cake*'s debut LP. Former Shrimp Boat captain Sam Prekop teams up with Coctail Archer Prewitt in the first cute-rock supergroup (including a

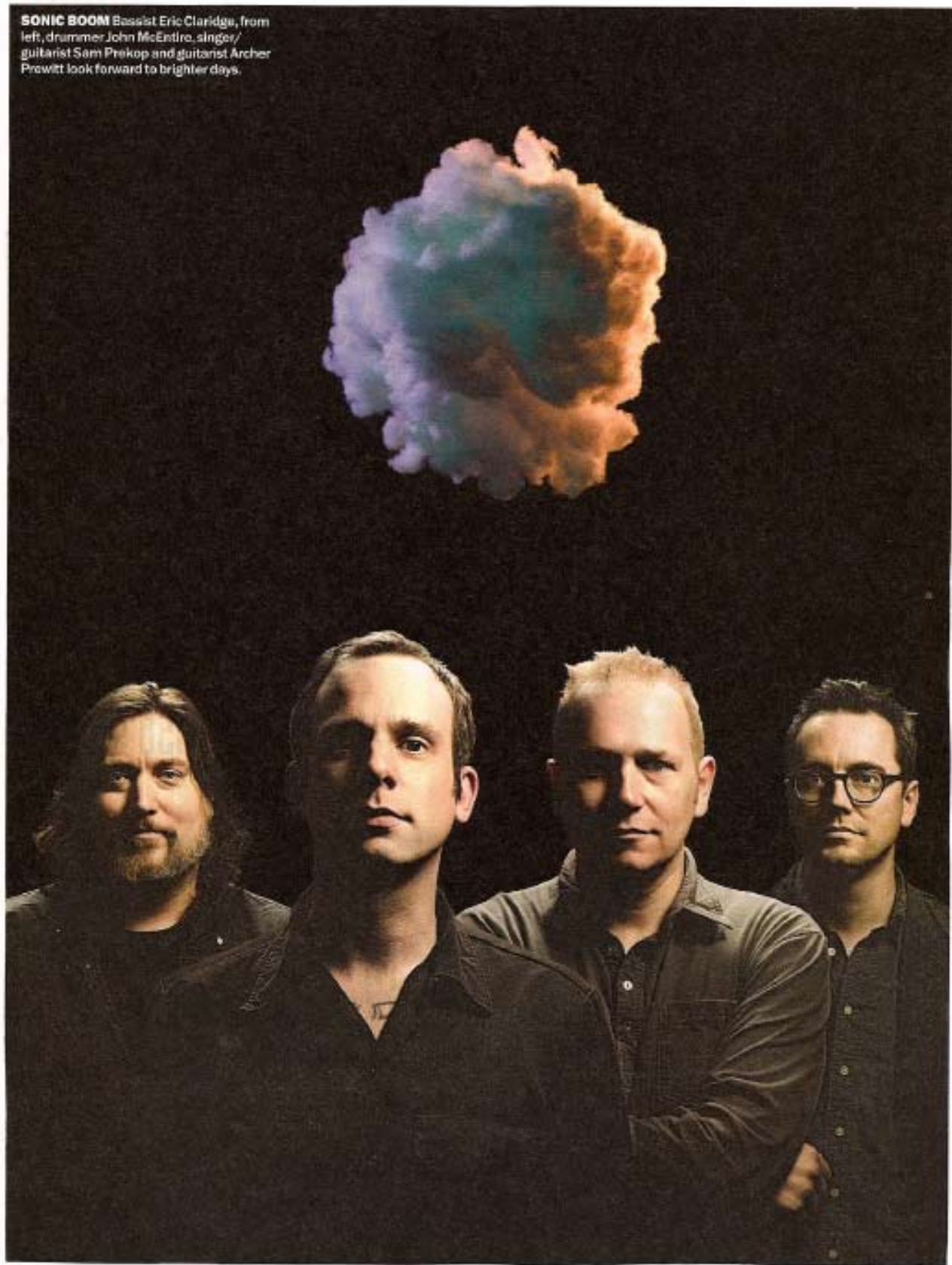
## THE SEA AND CAKE



rhythm section of Shrimp Boat and Bastro alums). The result is strutting pop that grooves lightly across Prekop and Prewitt's Afropoppy riffing, with Prekop moaning a college-boy version of the Cameo come-on with uneasy smarm. And while longtime fans may rue the stylistic mainstreaming of the *Sea and Cake*, the band has held fast to its most endearing trait, the studied amateurism that should be the single common denominator of DIY. (P.O. Box 476794, Chicago, IL 60647)

JEFFREY ROTTER

**SONIC BOOM** Bassist Eric Claridge, from left, drummer John McEntire, singer/guitarist Sam Prekop and guitarist Archer Prewitt look forward to brighter days.



# Sea *change*

Local post-rock pioneer the Sea and Cake abandons the studio trickery to produce its most organic-sounding album in years. By **Matthew Lurie** Photograph by **Chris Strong**

It began as—and remains—something of an anomaly: a group with no rock-star personalities, no love-lorn lyrics, no crazy drug stories and rarely even a distorted guitar. But seven albums in, it's hard to think of a Chicago band that's cultivated a more singular sound than the four-member group the Sea and Cake.

And yet, for the first time in its 13-year history, the band has decided its formula needs updating. On its latest release, *Everybody* (Thrill Jockey), the group brought in an outside producer, Brian Paulson (Son Volt, Slint) and recorded at Benton Harbor, Michigan's Key Club Studio. "It was just the first time in ages there was someone outside of the band contributing ideas," according to singer-guitarist Sam Prekop. "That was the most important aspect: to have someone else there to refer to on really basic things like, 'Is that song dragging?' 'Is the tempo totally out?' 'Could we do that better?'"

To our ears, the answer to that last question is no. *Everybody* relies less on overdubbing, keyboards and the wizardly abilities of John McEntire's unrivaled postproduction than previous albums. The underrated *One Bedroom* (2003) took the group's jazz-inflected, knob-twiddling sound as far as it could go—an aesthetic the band had been gradually moving toward since 1997's *The Faon*. Now liberated from the engineering chair, McEntire—who's also the band's percussionist—is free to focus on his excellent drumming. The rekindled chemistry is palpable and recalls the organic feel of the Sea and Cake's eponymous 1993 debut. "In a weird way, we sort of dipped back into that pool for this new record—we wanted to see what it would be like to work with just a four-piece rock band again," Prekop says.

The album kicks off with the airy "Up on Crutches," which emphasizes the sound of an acoustic guitar more than any previous Sea and Cake song. There's also the humid, soul-drenched melody of "Coconut," which gets cooled off by the the fuzz-box stomp and air-conditioned rhythm of "Crossing Line." It's the

same band as before, just now with more room to breathe, more space and, consequently, more freedom.

Inside the cozy Humboldt Park practice space the group shares with Tortoise—a ground-floor coach house crammed with amps, drums, vintage keyboards and drawing pads packed with compositional ideas hanging from the wall—the Sea and Cake prepares for its upcoming tour. Because of the complexity of the songs, a surprising amount of work goes toward simply committing them to memory. Prekop keeps large white cue cards with the lyrics at his feet ("It's my crutch," he sheepishly admits), while lead guitarist Archer Prewitt puts a small black book near his mike with specific delay times and cues for each song's guitar parts.

**"We wanted to see what it would be like to work with just a four-piece rock band again."**

The work seems to be paying off, as the band sounds both relaxed and cohesive during a rehearsal: McEntire's crisp and steady pulse begins every song; bassist Eric Claridge echoes Prekop's melodies in every register of his four-string; and Prewitt draws attention to critical moments with colorful guitar pedals and subtle fingerwork.

Despite the musicians' familiarity with each other, the Sea and Cake began as a single-record project for the U.K. label Rough Trade in 1993 after the disintegration of Prekop and Claridge's old band, Shrimp Boat. Prekop called Coctails drummer Prewitt to play guitar and, once in the studio, was "amazed" by Idful Studios intern McEntire, who was filling in for producer Brad Wood on drums. Little did Prekop know then, but all the band members eventually would have careers that would both complement and

compete with the group: Prewitt puts out solo records on Thrill Jockey and works as an illustrator and comic artist (his *Sof' Boy* strip is his most well known); McEntire runs Wicker Park's legendary Soma Studios in addition to helming Tortoise and playing in a few other bands; Claridge, a full-time painter, is also finishing up work on his first solo album; and Prekop has a successful solo career and will release a book of his photography in Japan later this year (his austere photos of Chicago are featured in the band's past few releases).

Given the band members' myriad interests, putting this album together involved a fair amount of logistical wrangling. "Basically, if I don't start it, it's not going to happen," Prekop says. "I blew it off for a long time, and then Bettina [Richards, Thrill Jockey owner] said it would be most beneficial if the record could come out at this time for her schedule. Also, with Tortoise working on a record now, it was just like, 'Okay, let's do this. And it has to happen tomorrow.'" Since it had been four years since the band last played together (excepting Prewitt and Prekop's tour with Stereolab last year), it took a little while to get used to playing together again. "Before we start up each time, I always have thoughts like, 'Is it going to work?' Prekop says. "And I'm always amazed at how readily it snaps back and the freakish reflex that we have as a band."

But this new phase of the band—sans keyboards and heavy editing—has inspired Prekop to think beyond the initial tour. "For the next record, I want to do it in the fall and just keep [the momentum] going after this tour," he says. "I can't take this for granted."

*The Sea and Cake plays two shows on May 31 at the Empty Bottle, and at the Pitchfork Music Festival on July 15.*



**FOR SAM PREKOP'S EXCLUSIVE COMMENTARY** on all the Sea and Cake albums, visit [timeoutchicago.com/features](http://timeoutchicago.com/features).

BY SIMON REYNOLDS

**T**HE SEA AND CAKE ARE CRAMMED INTO A VAN PARKED ON A BUSY side street in Manhattan's Lower East Side. They're here as opposed to somewhere more congenial because the guys are, perhaps forgivably, fearful lest the van and all their gear be ripped off. In a few hours the band will be sound-checking further downtown at Wetlands in preparation for its spot at the top of a bill that includes Pram and Laika from the ultracool British label Too Pure. This impressive avant-rock showcase will later draw a sweaty sardine crush of hipsters. Right now, though, the band is perspiring because it's huddled under the van's heat-magnifying roof. Wide-open side doors let in some breeze but also the din of passing trucks. And it doesn't help that all the band members are soft-spoken.

Singer, guitarist and Cake commandant Sam Prekop, for instance, speaks in a standard-issue Amer-indie drawl in which every syllable is equally unstressed, and words seep from his mouth as torpid and reluctantly as a slacker crawling out of bed.

Not that there's anything slack about the Sea and Cake's work rate. In a little more than a year, this Chicago-based art-pop unit has released three albums — its debut; its sequel, *Nassau*; and now *The Biz* — all via indie label Thrill Jockey. And Prekop says that already the band feels ripe to return to the studio and record a fourth. This productivity — a throwback to the late '60s when the Doors and Creedence Clearwater Revival would knock out three or four albums in two years — is all the more amazing when you consider that two members are moonlighting from their musical day jobs. Drummer John McEntire is involved in the highly regarded Chicago post-rock ensemble Tortoise and runs his own studio, Soma (see top left), while guitarist Archer Prewitt plays in the quirky combo Coctails.

So fertile is the Sea and Cake's collective muse that the songs come faster than they can actually handle them. "There are loads we've written that we never got to record, and we don't play 'em live much anymore, either," says Prekop. "We have to record them pretty quick, or they just fade away," adds Prewitt. The Sea and Cake can do that most of the time, thanks to McEntire's studio. Prekop calls it "John's Box of Hell, this small 120-degree box with no air. But we can make a lot of racket in the Box. The

*Biz* was recorded pretty much live — we only added a few small things."

What you'll find on *The Biz* and its equally enchanting predecessor is an airy almost-funk that variously recalls the iridescent shimmy of Mear Puppets' *Up on the Sun*, early Talking Heads (circa *More Songs About Buildings and Food*) and the chiming plangency of the Go-Betweens, if that Australian band had ever gotten on the good foot. For all its scintillating guitars, the Sea and Cake's sound isn't really riff based, which is perhaps why some critics have imagined a connection with African pop. Although they rebut that notion, the band members do cite soul, funk and Brazilian music as influences.

Prekop's testosterone-free falsetto adds to the levitational feel of the music: Imagine Stephen Malkmus emulating Al Green as opposed to the Fall's Mark E. Smith. What with Prekop's androgynous persona and dream-drift lyrics, the Sea and Cake are possibly the least grungy band in America. Referring to the wounded beligerence of grunge vocals, Prekop says: "That's definitely my least favorite kind of voice. I'm not a macho singer, for sure." And Prewitt talks about how showing vulnerability is a sign of strength: "When I listen to Al Green, I think of him as a really strong, together person, even though he's singing falsetto. Marvin Gaye, too."

What makes the Sea and Cake's music float and breathe is the way the band combines the spontaneity of a garage band with McEntire's dub-tweaked sensibility as a producer. He says *Nassau* in particular involved a heap of signal pro-

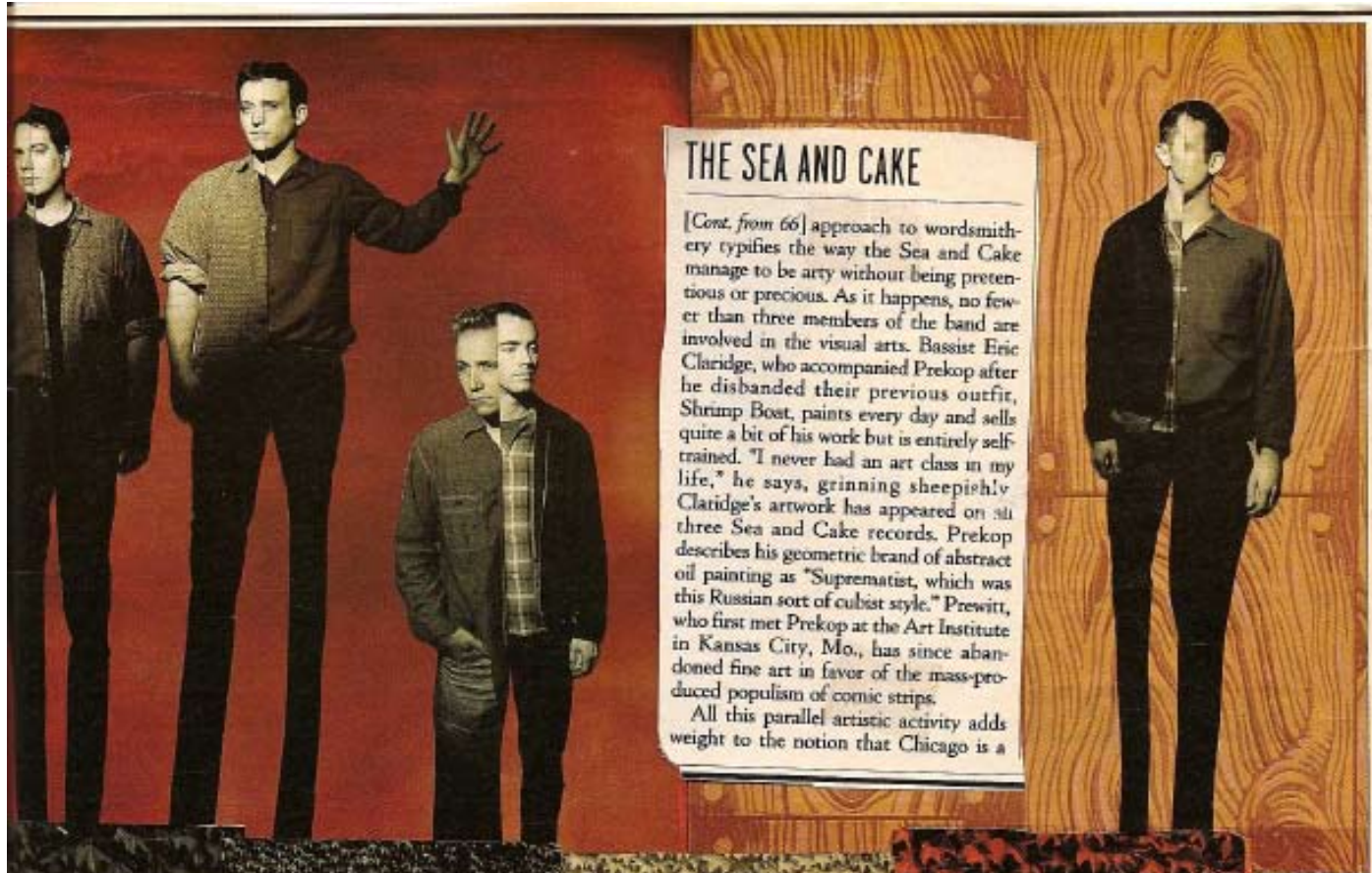
cessing, the technical term for "any kind of device that's outside the normal chain of sound, like a delay or a reverb." Listen to the way the drums are shrouded in a miasma of echo on "Alone, for the Moment" or the eerie treatment on Prekop's voice in "I Will Hold the Tea Bag," and you'll get an idea of McEntire's subtle brand of experimentalism. Ironically, McEntire feels that "in some ways, *Nassau* was maybe a bit too adventurous in terms of us trying to get different sounds. It works fine, but I like *The Biz* better because it's more streamlined."

As for the oblique, impressionistic lyrics, Prekop says he'll gather a mass of phrases and images, then condense them down to "the ones that somehow still surprise me. Lately the words have become more specific for each song, whereas before the lyrics could have almost been interchangeable between different tracks. There'll be a bunch of songs tonight where I may not sing words at all. I used to do entire sets like that, not singing a single word, and nobody ever noticed. As a listener, lyrics are the least important aspect of the music I like," he says before extolling Al Green's ability to turn any old "dumb-ass shit" into sublime poetry just through the magic of his voice.

Prekop's casual, cut-up [Cont. on 81]

# THE SEA

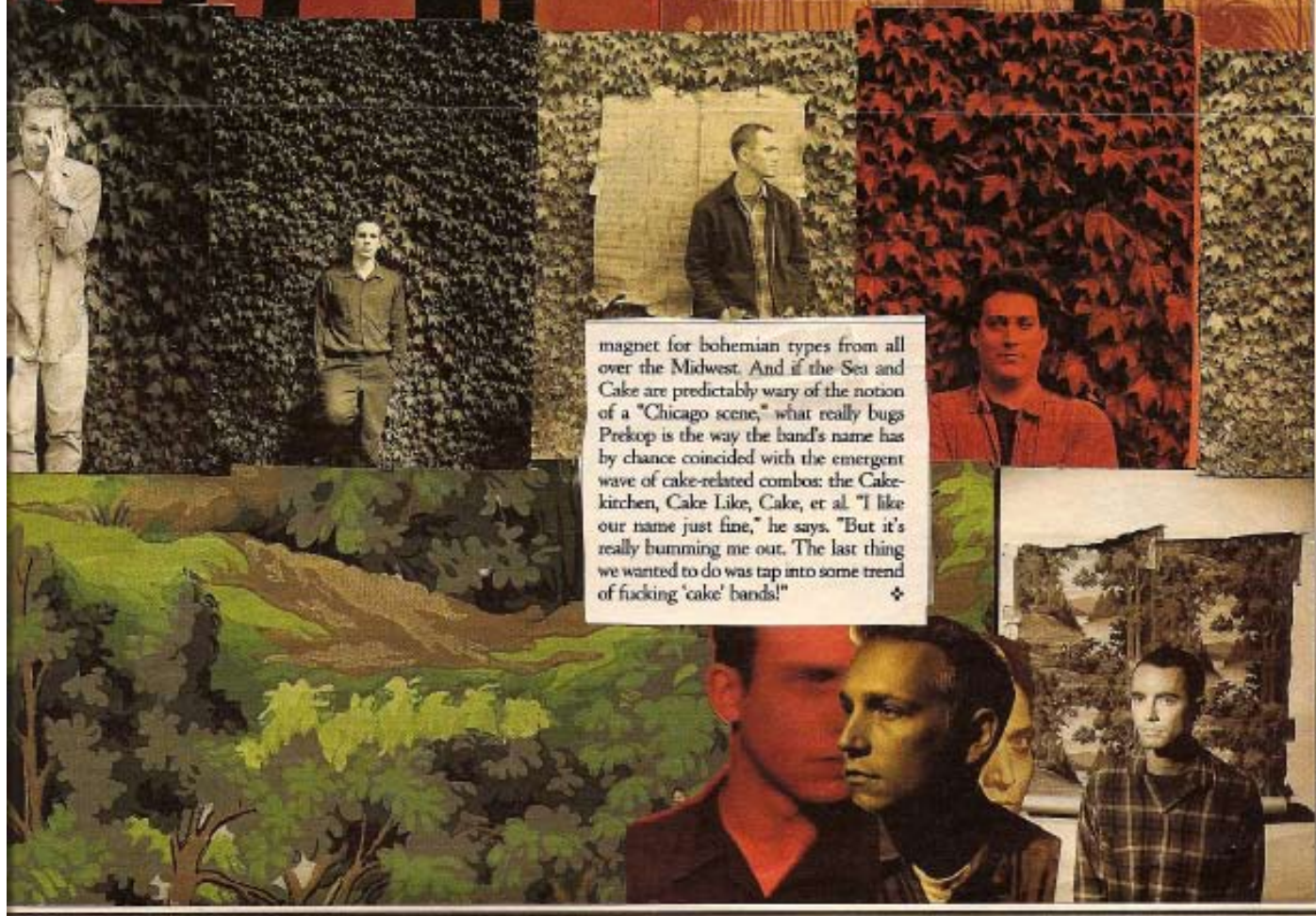
# AND CAKE



## THE SEA AND CAKE

[Cont. from 66] approach to wordsmithery typifies the way the Sea and Cake manage to be arty without being pretentious or precious. As it happens, no fewer than three members of the band are involved in the visual arts. Bassist Eric Claridge, who accompanied Prekop after he disbanded their previous outfit, Shrimp Boat, paints every day and sells quite a bit of his work but is entirely self-trained. "I never had an art class in my life," he says, grinning sheepishly. Claridge's artwork has appeared on all three Sea and Cake records. Prekop describes his geometric brand of abstract oil painting as "Suprematist, which was this Russian sort of cubist style." Prewitt, who first met Prekop at the Art Institute in Kansas City, Mo., has since abandoned fine art in favor of the mass-produced populism of comic strips.

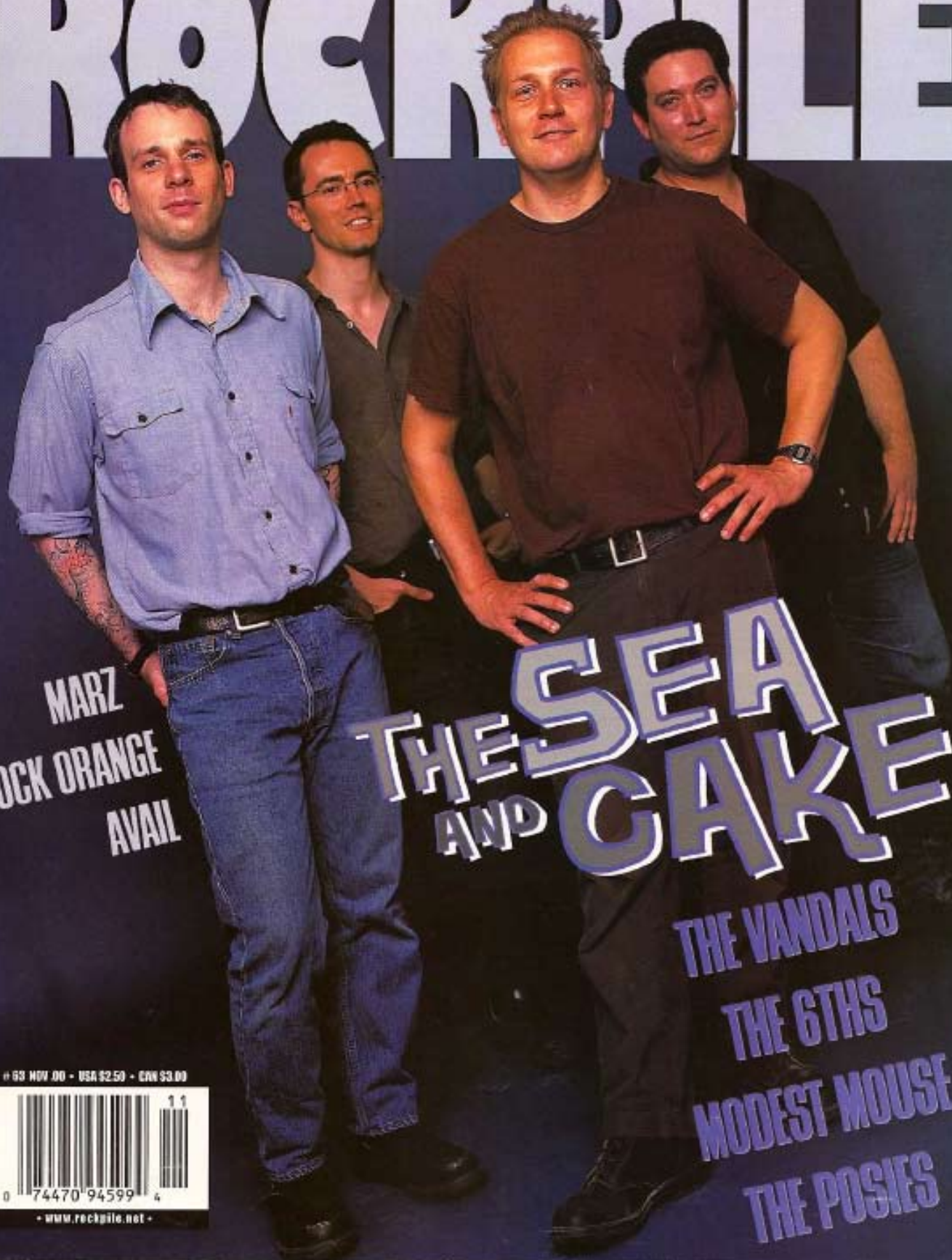
All this parallel artistic activity adds weight to the notion that Chicago is a



magnet for bohemian types from all over the Midwest. And if the Sea and Cake are predictably wary of the notion of a "Chicago scene," what really bugs Prekop is the way the band's name has by chance coincided with the emergent wave of cake-related combos: the Cake-kirchen, Cake Like, Cake, et al. "I like our name just fine," he says. "But it's really bumming me out. The last thing we wanted to do was tap into some trend of fucking 'cake' bands!" ♦

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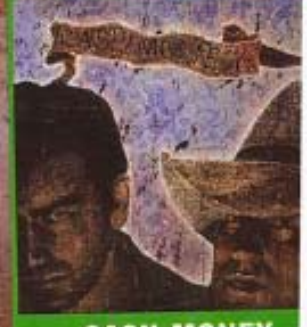
SEA AND CAKE



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