

Pop Talk: Is it loud enough yet? This band doesn't think so

by Sara Farr

Amber Valentine might just be the coolest woman in rock 'n' roll.

It's not because she's intelligent or attractive, though she is most definitely both.

It's not because she can write a killer rock tune, though she can do that, too.

It's because she plays her guitar through so many amplifiers that you can't see the stage, an effect that creates a virtual cocoon of reverberation that wraps you in sound from your head to your toes.

TURN IT UP TO 11 - Ed Livengood is the drummer, and his wife, Amber Valentine, the singer and guitarist for Jucifer, a rock band whose hallmark is high amplification. Their 45-minute performance uses so many amplifiers, says Valentine, it can take up to eight hours to wire the sounds system together. CNS Photo. And then, of course, there's the fact that she wears a hooded cloak before the shows, lending a faint whiff of science-fiction to an already surrealistic-sounding performance.

Valentine, one half of heavy rockers Jucifer, said it takes her, drummer and husband Ed Livengood, and a third person who travels with the band about three hours working together to set up the equipment for each show. The band requires so much electricity to power Valentine's amplifiers that they need to run about 300 feet of extension cable to bring power from other rooms and "sometimes the next building," Valentine said

with a laugh.

"It's a whole lot more maintenance than the average band, but it's worth it," Valentine said, speaking via telephone. "If the building is particularly uncondusive to what we're doing, it can take as much as eight hours to set up the show, which is really funny for a 35- to 45-minute show."

Though some might shake their heads, wondering why any band - especially one that's known for touring as extensively as Jucifer - would go through the hassle of a potentially eight-hour set-up time, Valentine said she can't imagine not having that larger-than-life sound, which has become Jucifer's hallmark.

"It's just unbelievably amazing to have that kind of volume in a room - and to have it reverberating back at you is incredible," she said. "We just love it."

Jucifer, which recently released its new album, "If Thine Enemy Hunger," formed 13 years ago in the indie-rock mecca of Athens, Ga., also home to R.E.M. and the B-52s. At the time, Valentine and Livengood were students at the University of Georgia, but the two quickly bonded over music, and for Valentine, classroom psychology gave way to psychology of the self.

"I had this sort of epiphany," she said. "I realized I wasn't one type of person. My textbooks essentially said that you need to integrate your different personalities and make them into one person, but I decided that was (expletive). The idea is that you're psychotic if you don't know who you are and if you let different personalities take you over from time to time, but the idea that you should subjugate all but one of the possible types of people you could be seemed unhealthy."

Consequently, the songs on the first two Jucifer albums were the highlights from that early period, material Valentine and Livengood thought was workable in a new context.

Those older songs' lyrics told stories that explored self-destructive behaviors through the use of cleverly constructed characters, while the music itself was another example of the light-versus-dark duality that continues to define the Jucifer sound.

While the wall-of-noise created by amplified guitar and bombastic drums parallels the heavy sounds of bands such as The Melvins and High on Fire, the hushed, girlish vocals of Valentine provide a disturbing counterpoint of sweetness. It's almost like finding a teddy bear at the scene of a horrendous accident or watching an ocean liner sink into a sea full of mermaids.

It's weird, but it's like Eve and the apple: irresistible.

As Valentine and Livengood have matured individually and as songwriting partners, their influences have started to encompass larger themes, such as history and contemporary issues, culminating in the more overtly political "War Bird" EP, released in 2004, and the new "If Thine Enemy Hunger."

The recording of "If Thine Enemy Hunger" was a particularly stressful period for Livengood and Valentine because the label they'd previously worked with, Velocette, wasn't sure it would have the resources to release the new Jucifer record. Because Jucifer wanted to give the label time to regroup and refocus, a parting seemed the best thing for both parties, but that left Jucifer in the awkward position of having no home for their new album - two years after the process started.

"When you finish a project, whether it's creative or something else, you want to be able to share it with people," Valentine said. "You feel excited about completing it. And a band like us, who's playing shows all the time, we'd constantly have fans coming up and asking us when the new album was coming out and we'd have to say we didn't know, 'It's finished, but you can't have it yet,' and that doesn't feel good."

Eventually, the band signed to Relapse, which in many ways was a more appropriate fit than either Velocette or Capricorn, which had released the band's 1999 release, "Calling All Cars on the Vegas Strip." Relapse is known for its emphasis on hard rock, and Valentine said the label makes a strong effort to effectively market Jucifer's records.

"I think they understand better how to function with the type of band we are," Valentine said. "Relapse has a strong preference for bands that tour a lot, which is ideal for us because that's what we do all the time."

The band's commitment to touring is so strong that Livengood and Valentine decided a few years ago to forgo having a house in Athens and now live in an RV and tour nearly full time. The two are so tightly intertwined that they don't even need instruments to write new songs.

"A lot of bands write material by playing together in a practice space, and we used to do that sometimes, but because it's just the two of us, we don't really have to be playing our instruments to write new songs," Valentine said. "If one of us has an idea, it's very easy for us to go through it verbally. Edgar will play a drum part on the table, or hit his foot on the floor for the kick drum, and we'll sing a guitar part or melody to each other, and because we've written together for so long, it's totally functional for us to work that way."

They've developed the same level of communication with producer Andy Baker, who began his recording career about the same time Jucifer started playing. As their collective knowledge has grown, the closer the albums have gotten to achieving the sound Valentine and Livengood first imagined for their recorded output, which admittedly bears little relationship to their live show.

"Early on, we came to the conclusion that if we limited ourselves to what we wanted to perform live, it would really be painful and negate the point of making an album," Valentine said. "At the same time, we didn't want to have guest musicians or play along with samples live, because for us the whole intensity and visceral nature of what we feel at a live show would be compromised if we did any of those things. So we had to decide that records and live shows would be separate entities, and we're both really happy with that decision."

Valentine and Livengood said they believe art should be about pleasing themselves creatively rather than appealing to the lowest common denominator, though Valentine readily admitted she "loves the Paris Hilton record" and "likes to watch stupid TV."

"False art can be fun; it really can," she said. "But if we did that, we wouldn't be pleasing ourselves creatively, and that's what it should really be about; both of us believe that. That will probably keep us from being millionaires, but at least we can sleep at night and be 100 percent proud of what we put out in the world."

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