

Pop Talk: Indie adoration - Life is good for The Shins

by Nina Garin

"Saturday Night Live" is a show where one expects to see the most famous of the famous in the pop world: Justin Timberlake, Kelly Clarkson, Gwen Stefani, Kanye West.

The Shins?

INDIE ADORATION - The Shins made a guest appearance on 'Saturday Night Live' earlier this year. CNS Photo courtesy of Sub Pop.

How did The Shins get on "SNL" earlier this year? We're talking about an indie band without any hit singles, a band that only gets played on alternative radio stations, and whose members have been spotted chatting with its fans after shows.

Still, there they were, the somewhat nerdy Shins, performing two of their songs on the late-night comedy show just before the release of their third album, "Wincing the Night Away." The only other indie band in recent memory to appear on "SNL" was the British band Arctic Monkeys.

Groups like Modest Mouse, Death Cab for Cutie and even Nirvana were already signed to major labels when they made their "SNL" debuts. Perhaps The Shins' repertoire of beautiful, layered pop songs got them the spot. Or maybe producer Lorne Michaels is a big fan.

But, most likely, it was that endorsement by Natalie Portman.

In the movie "Garden State," Portman's character takes off her headphones and puts them on Zach Braff's character. She tells him that The Shins will "change your life" as the haunting song "New Slang" plays.

And just like that, a whole new set of fans fell in love with that song and the guys who wrote it.

While something that corny - and mainstream - can kill an indie band's reputation, it has instead made The Shins stronger than ever.

"I've always been happy about the movie," said the band's warbly voiced frontman, James Mercer. "I mean, if you can write songs and have other people like them and help promote your band, I don't see the downside. The other guys complain about it sometimes, but I have yet to hear them intelligently explain why it's bad."

The future of the band may have turned out differently if "Wincing the Night Away" wasn't as good as it is. Because some of the band's early fans were pretty upset after the band sold "New Slang" to McDonald's many years ago, before it became commonplace for indie rockers to make some extra cash.

And then there was the whole "Garden State" fiasco.

Hipsters who originally loved The Shins began making fun of the movie. The Shins became a band that girls in middle school, like, totally love. Older fans were nervous that the new image would ruin the band's pure sound.

Instead, the band gave its fans an album that went past its jangly Beach Boys-inspired sound and grew into something more complex and spacey.

"I knew we were going to have a lot of people waiting for this record," Mercer said. "But I didn't really think about that. I spent a lot of time on this record alone, and it led to a whole lot of new ideas."

"Wincing the Night Away" debuted at No. 2 on the Billboard charts, marking the highest debut and the highest sales figures in the history of its label, Sub Pop.

This, of course, means that labels bigger than Sub Pop have been sniffing around the band, which also includes Marty Crandall, Jesse Sandoval, Dave Hernandez and Eric Johnson.

And since The Shins' contract with Sub Pop is up, there's a good chance the band might finally make that big label crossover.

"We're going to do the smartest thing for our future," Mercer said. "But it's possible we'd work with Sub Pop again. We're in a strong position right now because we've proven that we can make money doing this."

But a guy like Mercer, who made the first Shins' album in his New Mexico home, seems too creative to be driven by the pressure of big hits and huge sales that drive the major labels.

He's an underground guy at heart.

"It seems like there's always going to be people working hard to make a living off music," he said. "But I like that the right people are making money. Sub Pop is having a banner year, while Capitol Records is struggling. I think it's kind of cool. Not that I have anything against Capitol, but I always like an underdog story."

Mercer even grew up listening to music that wasn't popular or mainstream. He was influenced by the soulful sounds of Sam Cooke, Wilson Pickett and Jackie Wilson. And then he heard the music of fellow indie pioneers, Apples In Stereo, and realized it was possible to mix genres to create something unique.

"I was really tired of that whole lack of melody thing going on in the 1990s," he said. "I like Pavement, but I was thirsty for classic pop. And then I heard The Apples and I was so impressed, it was like a revelation. They showed me you can take this old R&B that I loved and throw in the sort of British invasion kind of stuff."

This delicate musical mixture turned out to resonate among music fans more than Mercer ever anticipated.

Now The Shins are touring nonstop and showing up in the most mainstream of places like ABC News.

But while the band's swirly songs may have changed Portman's life - or at least her character - they have no doubt changed the life of Mercer and his band members.

And we got to watch some of that happen live, one Saturday night.

Copley News Service

Join the cult

Band: The Shins

Hometown: Portland via Albuquerque

Formed: 1996

Members: James Mercer, Marty Crandall, Jesse Sandoval, Dave Hernandez and Eric Johnson

For fans of: The Beach Boys, Apples in Stereo, Motown and New Wave

TV star: Crandall's girlfriend, Elyse Sewell, was the runner-up in "America's Next Top Model, Cycle 1." She wore Shins' T-shirts throughout the season, and Crandall even showed up in an episode.

Get your Shins on

Below is a recommended Shins' catalog:

- "Oh, Inverted World" (Sub Pop, 2001): This magical debut was recorded in James Mercer's home studio.

It's the album with "New Slang."

- "Chutes Too Narrow" (Sub Pop, 2003): The Shins' second effort is less whimsical but still has a sunny, Brian Wilson-esque sound.

- "Garden State" soundtrack (Sony, 2004): A Grammy Award-winning soundtrack featuring Zach Braff's favorite bands - The Shins, Coldplay, Remy Zero and Thievery Corporation.

- "SpongeBob SquarePants Movie: Music From the Movie and More" soundtrack (Sire, 2004): A surprisingly great album featuring new, original songs by The Shins, The Flaming Lips, Wilco and Ween.

- "Wincing the Night Away" (Sub Pop, 2007): The band crosses into more mature, sophisticated songwriting with lots of layered melodies and haunting beats.

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