

Bands take similar paths to stardom

by *George_Varga*

For all their obvious differences, the White Stripes and Smashing Pumpkins have much more in common than first meets the ear or eye.

SMASHING PUMPKINS - Smashing Pumpkins lead guitarist/singer Billy Corgan and drummer Jimmy Chamberlin are the only original members of the Smashing Pumpkins on the band's current tour. CNS Photo courtesy of C. Thomas Verfaillie. Both bands hail from major Rust Belt cities (Chicago for the Pumpkins, Detroit for the Stripes), and were formed in the 1990s (the Pumpkins near the start of that decade, the Stripes toward the end of it). And both bands started out small, with ambitions to match, before their music, vision and hard work helped propel them into the limelight.

The Pumpkins' first recordings were for Chicago's wryly named Limited Potential while the Stripes debuted on the tiny Detroit indie label Italy, then signed with Sympathy for the Record Industry. A swelling underground buzz subsequently saw both bands move up to the majors (Virgin Records for the Pumpkins, the Virgin subsidiary V2 for the Stripes).

The Stripes now record for Warner Bros., which this year released "Icky Thump," the band's seventh album. "Zeitgeist," the Pumpkins' seventh album (and first since the group imploded in 2000), was released this year on the Warner sister label Reprise.

While neither band fits too comfortably in the genre, then or now, both quickly became alternative-rock darlings. Their gradual ascent to international stardom came without either band losing much of its all important indie-rock cred.

This cutting-edge vs. mainstream success balancing act is a tricky one. The Stripes and Pumpkins have handled it better than most, with or without their appearances (in cartoon form) on the perpetually hip TV series "The Simpsons."

Like their slash-and-burn guitar work, the high-pitched lead vocals of the Pumpkins' Billy Corgan, 40, and the Stripes' Jack White, 32, are instantly recognizable trademarks of their respective bands - just as the Stripes' stripped-down, two-piece lineup is perhaps its singularly most distinguishing - and limiting - musical characteristic. (A mainstay of blues since the 1940s, the guitar-and-drum duo configuration was first launched in rock in 1970 by the Blue Cheer offshoot band Lucifer, before being resurrected in the 1980s by bluesy folk-rockers House of Freaks.)

Intriguingly, the Pumpkins can now also be viewed as a duo, even though its current tour features for-hire musicians Ginger Reyes on bass, Jeff Schroeder on guitar and Lisa Harriton on keyboards. Corgan and drummer Jimmy Chamberlin are the only original band members now on board. They are also the only musicians featured on "Zeitgeist," essentially a Corgan solo album in all but name.

Ex-Pumpkins rhythm guitarist James Iha and bassist D'Arcy Wretzky had minimal involvement on the band's earlier albums. Neither was invited to participate in the reunion of what Corgan has always called "my band," an issue that has sparked considerable controversy among current and former fans of the group.

But Corgan's best work with the Pumpkins still strikes a major chord with many listeners. And since his solo career bombed, it's not surprising he opted to revive the Pumpkins' brand name and bring Chamberlin, one of rock's finest drummers, back on board.

While it would be a stretch to say one band handed the baton to the other, the Pumpkins' demise in 2000 more or less coincided with the Stripes' rise to greater popularity. Equally notable is how both bands at their peak (which is now for the Stripes and was the mid-1990s for the Pumpkins) have been hailed as innovators while owing such a major debt to their musical forefathers.

In the case of Corgan, the Pumpkins' founder, lead singer and songwriter (who, for all intents and purposes, is the Pumpkins), that would be Queen, Cheap Trick, Jimi Hendrix and Black Sabbath, by way of The Cure, Bauhaus, Led Zeppelin and Thin Lizzy.

For White, the Stripes' lead singer and creative mastermind, that would be such blues greats as Robert Johnson, Son House and Blind Willie McTell, along with a heavy dose of the bluesy English hard-rock bands Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple (whose original organist, Jon Lord, has been singled out for praise by White). It remains unclear what the musical influences are of Meg White, Jack's press-shy former wife who is the Stripes' proudly rudimentary drummer and very infrequent singer.

White is an undeniably talented musician and stylistic synthesist, and his raw, visceral performances on record and in concert pack a major punch. But his artistic influences are so obvious - be it his Robert Plant-like vocal wails or his fiery but clearly recycled guitar riffs and song structures - that he has the distinction of sounding instantly recognizable but not remotely original.

"I didn't jump on the techno bandwagon or the hip-hop bandwagon. I like playing my guitar," he said.

"You have to separate bands that are accidentally sounding like someone else from bands ripping someone off, like Green Day's 'When I Come Around,' which is a complete rip-off of 'Picture Book' by The Kinks. These kids don't know that, that's for sure, just like they don't know Green Day's 'Boulevard of Broken Dreams' is a rip-off of Kurt Weill (and Bertolt Brecht's 'Alabama Song')."

It's disingenuous for White to single out Green Day, or anyone else, when so many of his own songs owe such a debt to earlier works by Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and myriad blues artists.

But for fans unfamiliar with his inspirations, it really doesn't matter, even if it's difficult to envision how much farther he can take the Stripes. Not coincidentally, White has a second album due soon with The Raconteurs, the far more versatile quartet he co-leads with Brendan Benson.

As for the Pumpkins, this band-in-name-only's current tour has done reasonably well so far. But that's because of the deep affection fans have for Corgan and Chamberlin's earlier work, not the so-so "Zeitgeist"

which (barely two months after its release) is No. 66 on the national Billboard album charts and dropping fast.

Smashing? Barely. Encouraging? No.

But as the record industry continues to implode and bands young and old struggle to survive, Smashing Pumpkins and White Stripes have two key things in common - instant name recognition and loyal followings. And in rock 'n' roll, circa 2007, that's a lot.

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