

If band bio's are to be believed (which they most certainly should not be), the Circus Devils started at the behest of a dog-faced man who approached both Guided by Voices' frontman Robert Pollard and the Tobias brothers, proclaiming that "Circus Devils is real!" Sharing this shocking and grammatically perplexing experience, the trio did the only logical thing... formed a band.

Serving as a blank canvas for each of its members' expansive curiosities, the Circus Devils have just released *Gringo*, their seventh and perhaps "least challenging" or "most straightforward" release to date. Providing the musical backing for Bob's tales of the bizarre, the Tobias brothers have a long history of their own - performing in such other groups as Clouds Forming Crowns, The Celebrity Pilots, Gem and a number of other Pollard projects like Guided by Voices, Psycho and the Birds and much of his solo work. GhettoBlaster recently had a chance to talk with the two about the new Circus Devils album and their long-standing relationship with the hardest-working man in rock n' roll.

# Circus Devils...Is real

**GhettoBlaster: Is there anything or anyone you'd specifically cite as influences for the Circus Devils? For some reason I feel hesitant to constrict "anything" to just music or "anyone" to just musicians...**

Todd Tobias: Direct influences are probably unconscious most of the time. Among the three of us there is a lot of overlap to our favorite music. One album we all love is the Beatles' *White Album*, and we refer to it a lot as a kind of standard. Tim and I are from Akron, so Devo has always been a big influence. Along with Devo, I know Wire has been an influence for Bob. For me, there are composers like Bernard Herrmann that have shaped my musical imagination. On *Gringo*, Ennio Morricone was more of a conscious influence. On the non-musical side, *Gringo* has a lot of influences going on - like some of the mythical aspects of the American Southwest, the desert, starry skies, old gas stations, atomic blasts and sorcerers... On our previous records, a non-musical influence for me has been primitive tribes. Or I should say, any traces of the cave man I can find in myself. *Gringo* is more civilized than our other records.

Tim Tobias: I'm not sure what my influences are until long after I've written something. Mostly I go into it with a blank slate and just try to allow things to happen. I like the lack of direct musical influence personally - in other words, I can write whatever I want without preconception beyond the vague parameters that Todd and Bob give me, and then they take it and turn it into something else. I love that part. The total non-concern about anything beyond freedom. Also, just writing music and knowing Bob Pollard is going put a melody to it - that's like Christmas.

**GB: Past Circus Devils recordings have been described as "challenging" - have you thought of that as a fair description?**

Tim: I guess it depends on your definition of "challenging." I can see where some people might consider it as such. *Sgt. Disco*, which I wasn't a part of so I can be totally objective, to me that is the album that sums up what Circus Devils is about - there's everything in there, from beautiful, aching music, to very heavy dark things, to total rock to the ridiculous - Bob uses this word and he means it as a positive thing. I like "ridiculous" too. It means you went somewhere you might not have ever considered before 'cus you were too self-conscious or whatever and Circus Devils is all about stripping away that obstacle to the imagination. It's good to get real gone.

Todd: I think challenging is a fair term. We've also heard terms like "difficult" and "weird." But descriptions like that sound more like excuses to disregard it. All we ask is that people give the albums a chance to grow on them. We know it takes time. Maybe at first it seems too in your face, or it denies you a comfortable seat, so to speak. But we're not trying to alienate listeners. The albums are made as albums, and not just as a heap of songs. The idea is to take the listener on a trip, or to create a world for them to visit . . . and then to leave it behind. They'll want to leave it behind.

**GB: Would you use the word "challenging" to describe *Gringo*?**

Tim: Not at all. It's easy to listen to without being easy listening. There's a calm to it I appreciate, but there's still that tilt to the subconscious. Bob makes, to my thinking, adventure stories - and Todd creates the landscapes for the characters to wander in, whether it's *Gringo* or *Harold Pig*, or *Sgt. Disco*...

**GB: Did you set out to create a more straightforward record this time?**

Tim: Not "straightforward," just different than what we've done before.

Todd: Different for us would mean having some female fans. Well, I shouldn't say that. We have two.

**GB: Would you say you do Circus Devils more as a creative outlet for yourself as opposed to any major concern over your audience?**

Todd: With the music, I'm trying to focus on mood more than anything. If I can establish a mood with a piece of music, it helps Bob when it comes time for him to flesh out the song with his scenes and characters. My mind-set is searching for moods and atmospheres. Speaking for Bob, his mind-set is to enter the world that the album inhabits, with all the characters he creates. So in a way, I think we're trying to entertain ourselves. For us the albums are kind of like movies. It's not easy to cast the same kind of spell with an album that a film can achieve. Maybe that's the nature of the challenge that you mentioned - for the listener I mean. It takes a certain willingness to participate in an entire album to the degree that you let it take you on a trip. Most people aren't geared toward listening to albums that way, at least not these days. But that's what we're intending when we make the records.

**GB: Bob's recently been touring out a little more recently - is there any chance of a Circus Devils live performance?**

Todd: Tim and I are up for it. Bob has been reluctant to perform in the past, but maybe we can talk him into it.

Words: David C. Obenour



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