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ARTS

They're Staggered but will survive

BY NICK KREWEN
FOR THE RECORD

Staggered Crossing is chomping at the bit, to go further, again.

Actually, Further Again was about as far as the Toronto band got on its road to world domination. The year was 2001, and although the top-10 hit helped spur 13,000 sales of its self-titled debut the band lost its contract with Warner after a corporate reshuffling, a phenomenon that has been hitting the music industry with increasing frequency.

"I think there's a lot of bureaucracy," says dreadlocked singer Julian Taylor. "They dropped a lot of the acts at that time — it wasn't just us. AOL merged with Warner and what they needed to do was cut their bottom line. We were a new act and sold 13,000 albums over an eight-month period. It wasn't bad but it was by no means Nickelback numbers, who sold 80,000 copies in a matter of days."

After Staggered Crossing endured a personnel shift of its own, the band took the Warner buyout money and the revamped lineup of Taylor and fellow members Dan Black (bass), Dave Marshall (guitar) and Jeremy Elliott (drums) recorded a second album, *Last Summer When We Were Famous*, with ex-Wilco member Jay Bennett in the production seat.

But that wasn't the end of their problems: a professional falling out with high-powered manager Larry Wanagas, who helped established k.d. lang as an international star and is currently overseeing The Trews, put the band back to square one.

"We wanted to sit down and write tunes and be left alone," Taylor explains. "He wanted us to sign on and be a part of Bum-

stead Productions and hand over our masters. It was just bad timing. We were pretty sensitive about being dropped from the record company in the first place and not wanting to do anything from our masters."

In the end however, both Taylor and bassist Black say the hard life lessons have only made them more resilient.

"We just keep knocking down the doors," says Black. "We needed to call people and learn the ropes ourselves, and we've made a lot of mistakes independently, as we did on a major label. And I assume we'll continue to do that. But we're learning."

The learning curve continues with *Burgundy & Blue*, a brand new effort released last fall on the band's own **B a d**

Penny label. The challenge this time around: identity. It's a little more difficult when Taylor, who is black and fronting a Caucasian band of rockers, gets pigeonholed with the Hootie & The Blowfish syndrome.

No wonder Staggered Crossing might just be the most misunderstood Canadian band of the current rock landscape.

"The misunderstood label fits us really well," says Taylor. "When we first came out, I don't think we were given a fair shot. And I don't think we gave ourselves a fair shot, to be honest with you. We thought at a very young age we were

on our way to the top. And I think it's fortunate in a way that we're not. It's bought us the time to grow and learn about our art form, to hone our skills in whatever we're doing through business and music.

"But I think it's hard to define who Staggered Crossing is from an image perspective. Really what we are is an eclectic indie band and maybe that's not the most marketable thing in the world.

"We're in close proximity, I think, to bands like Wilco and Buffalo Tom, but our band has been compared to Hootie & The Blowfish, unfairly, for years. We look more the part than we sound it — me being a black lead singer for a rock 'n' roll band."

So what does Staggered Crossing sound like? Touches of reggae on some songs; new wave throwbacks with a slight country flair on others; a touch of elec-

CONCERT	
Who:	Staggered Crossing, with Ultra Violet
Where:	Fiddler's Green, Cambridge
Day:	Thursday
Time:	8 p.m.
Phone:	662-5270
Web:	Fiddlersgreen.info

tronica here and some heavy romanticism there.

It's eclectic all right. "We're not one-dimensional people and we don't want to sound like a one-dimensional band," says Taylor, who notes the band recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

"When we were recording our second album with Jay Bennett, one thing that he taught us was that you shouldn't squelch ideas. You should follow things through until they don't make sense and when they don't make sense, it'll be obvious.

"So when it comes to a musical standpoint, we've always tried to do as much as we could. And when it doesn't make sense, you can hear it."

Meanwhile, as the band lyricist, Taylor says songs like *Nuclear Winter (Next 2 You)* and *Save Me Tonight* exploit his passion for passion.

"I'm a romantic at heart," says Taylor. "When I was in university, one of the courses I liked the most was romanticism. That's pretty much what I focus on, so a lot of the times these songs deal with love and nature and the body politic.

"I'm not trying to be Bob Dylan. I'm just trying to write what I feel inside of me."

CANADIAN PRESS

Staggered Crossing, with Dave Marshall, Julian Taylor, Jeremy Elliott and Dan Black, hope the rough times are over and they can get back to doing what they do best — making music.



REVIEW

You don't have to follow iPod craze like a robot

Apple gadgets are popular, solid pieces of hardware, but there are alternatives

BY MATT TULLOCH
RECORD STAFF

So you've just got to get an iPod. Maybe it's because of the ultra-hip television ads featuring hit songs like *Are You Gonna Be My Girl*. Maybe it's because Bono owns one or maybe it's because the popular girls at school each carry a personalized hue of iPod mini in their purse. Whatever the reason, iPods are hotter than wildfire and spreading just as quickly.

Celebrities are seen carrying iPods as they jog through the tabloids and the player has become a drool-inducing audio gadget for techies and non-techies alike.

For anyone who doesn't know, the iPod is a pocket-sized music player designed to handle digital music files like mp3s with ease.

Last year Apple, known for revolutionary computers, posted its highest ever earnings report largely due to strong iPod sales.

That said, aside from being fashionable, there aren't many reasons to own an iPod. Sure, they're solid pieces of hardware; Apple is known for great engineering, chic design and high prices.

But take, for example, the Creative

Zen Media Center.

For years, Creative has been the industry standard in personal computer sound cards. It stands to reason that the company responsible for soundblaster technology (as synonymous to sound cards as gelatin is to Jell-O) could make a strong foray into the portable digital music market.

Zen, however, is so much more than a simple mp3 player. Let's compare Zen to Apple's most luxurious iPod model, the iPod photo. Both retail for just under \$700 and both handle most digital audio formats and boast colour screens. Both also have the ability to display photographs but that's where the similarities end.

iPod photo is marketed as a music player and photo album. Owners can easily upload digital photographs to their iPod photo and enjoy them on the go. I'm not really sure why anyone would be excited about this feature. Perhaps I'm not sentimental enough but perusing photos of ex-girlfriends on the bus ride home from work has no appeal to me.

Zen also allows you to store and view photos, except on a much larger, crisper screen. What really sets Zen



ASSOCIATED PRESS

iPods (left) are the rage right now but Sony's PlayStation Portable is being marketed as the iPod killer.

apart is the ability to play video files.

Simpsons freaks can store upwards of five entire seasons of the iconic show on their Zen, but let's not stop there. The ability to play video means all those sentimental, photo loving types can watch home movies in the office or entire full-length films during a child's ballgame.

While the decked out iPod photo has more storage capacity (40 gigabytes to Zen's 20) this simply means the difference between 400 hours of music and 800 hours (or 10,000 photos versus 20,000). Unless you're going to be away from your personal computer for 800 hours, you don't have to worry about your tunes going stale.

One step further, for a much more

reasonable \$370 you can order a 60-gigabyte Creative Nomad mp3 player which is designed as smartly as any Apple product. A 40-gigabyte iPod without photo capabilities costs \$529.

For those with patience, there is something even better on the horizon.

On March 24 electronics giant Sony is unleashing the iPod killer, PlayStation Portable. The device, which is referred to as the PlayStation, can do so many things that all your other portable electronic devices will be embarrassed.

Like other media players, the PlayStation can play mp3s, view photos and play video files and its design is even sleeker and sexier than the competition. Unlike other players, the PlayStation is also a gaming system.

Gamers will be shocked to see PlayStation 2 quality games in a device small enough to dangle from their neck on a lanyard.

The PlayStation uses a new format called the Universal Media Disc to play games, movies and even albums by popular musicians. Universal Media Discs aren't much larger than a \$2 coin and have enough capacity to produce DVD quality sound and video.

Sony has already announced that the PlayStation will ship with a copy of the movie *Spiderman 2*. The bundle will cost \$249 US.

The PlayStation sold over 200,000 units on the first day of its Japanese release in December.

The only drawback to the PlayStation is that it does not have an internal hard drive so you'll have to buy another media format, the memory stick, to transfer mp3s or photos from your personal computer.

Put simply, iPod devotees could do much better. Creative and Sony aren't the only other big dogs in the portable media kennel. There are many players on the market that offer more features and much lower prices than iPod.

But go ahead and spoil yourself. Buy that fancy new iPod. It'll look great next to your VCR, tape deck and UHF television.

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A Zen experience moves to Kitchener

Tickets for *Blowing Zen*, a special studio workshop presentation of shakuhachi (Japanese bamboo flute) music presented by the MT Space (a multicultural theatre company located in Kitchener's Globe Studios) earlier this month, sold out very quickly. Encouraged by the interest shown by the community, a second evening with shakuhachi master Bonchiku Hoshi has been scheduled for Friday.

Word has it that there are only a few spaces left for this performance as well. There will, however, almost certainly be other opportunities to hear the shakuhachi sound in the days ahead: last fall, Bonchiku Hoshi decided to make Kitchener his home.

So why would a master shakuhachi player in the Tozan school, who studied the Fuké honkyoku tradition under the great Mitsuhashi Kifu, and a master shakuhachi maker who has made instruments for many of the leading players in Japan, choose to come to Waterloo Region?

Thanks to Keiko Belair of the Waterloo Region Japanese Canadian Community Association, who arranged an interview with the master and volunteered to serve as translator, I got a chance to ask Bonchiku.

His story is a fascinating one.



MARTIN DEGROOT
ARTS AND CULTURE

Part of the reason why Bonchiku is here today is a special attraction that has drawn him to this continent that began when he was still in his teens that was originally inspired by the classic film *Easy Rider*. Born to be Wild is the last thing you would think of when you meet Bonchiku or hear him *Blowing Zen* — or the image of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper "riding on the highway, looking for adventure." But it was seeing this film, plus a long-standing love of American jazz, that led him to come to America and spend several adventurous years that included cycling from Montreal to Vancouver, and hitchhiking from British Columbia to Guatemala.

It was in Vancouver, through a chance meeting with someone who was involved in introducing Japanese

culture to Canadians, that Bonchiku got interested in the shakuhachi tradition. So he went back to Japan, where after many years of study and a lengthy apprenticeship, opened his own studio and went on to become a highly regarded instrument maker and player.

Starting in 1998, he began receiving invitations to lecture and perform in Canada. His visits became more and more frequent, until 2003, when he decided to stay here permanently, first in Vancouver, and later in Quebec.

The connection here came through a student who worked with the master in Vancouver. When he came here for the first time last September, it was just for a visit, in response to a long-standing invitation from this former pupil and friend. He enjoyed himself here, wandering around, exploring the place in a leisurely fashion. One day he found himself at Kitchener City Hall. Attracted by the acoustics of the Rotunda, he pulled out his shakuhachi and began to play, by himself, just for the pleasure of it. Gina Holstead, who works as special events co-ordinator with community services at Kitchener City Hall, happened to come by. Enthralled by what she heard, she invited the artist to perform at the opening cer-

emonies for the new Kitchener Market.

Bonchiku was so impressed with what he encountered here that he decided to stay. The connection with the MT Space project and with the Waterloo Region Japanese Canadian Community Association promptly followed suit.

As an instrument maker, Bonchiku is an accomplished practitioner working in an ancient craft tradition. He is a folk artist in the true sense of the term, both as a maker and a player. He often performs at folk festivals, and so would fit in well at an event like the Mill Race Festival of Traditional Music in Cambridge. Shakuhachi is also part of what might be called the classical music of Japan, so a recital at the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber Music Society Music Room or at the Maureen Forrester Recital Hall at Wilfrid Laurier University would also be appropriate.

Most of the music in the *Blowing Zen* on Friday will be traditional. But Bonchiku is equally if not more interested in contemporary shakuhachi music. As a maker, he has developed a unique way of crafting the bore so that his instruments can be played both with an "old style" mellow sound, or with the stronger, more clearly focused tone required for modern pieces.

For more on Bonchiku Hoshi and



PUBLICITY PHOTO

Bonchiku Hoshi performs on a Japanese bamboo flute during *Blowing Zen*, an evening of Shakuhachi Music at the MT Space in Kitchener.

the shakuhachi tradition, visit www.japanshakuhachi.com/bonchiku.html

To reserve tickets and for more information about *Blowing Zen*, or to inquire about studying shakuhachi playing or making with Bonchiku Hoshi, contact Lorena Bendana of the MT Space at 585-7763 or info@mtspace.ca.