

Music

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OLLEEN HEATON

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Squeeze Box Rock

The Thin Man's third album evokes the best of literate English R & B... only there's an accordion.

By Bob Mehr



The Meter

It takes a **Thin Man** to rock it with an accordion.

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JIM NEWBERRY

Kennedy Greenrod, Saleem Dhamee, Mike McGrath, Jason LaBrosse

The Meter

themeter@chicagoreader.com
www.chicagoreader.com/TheMeter

Kennedy Greenrod might never have had a musical career were it not for his older sisters—or more specifically his sisters' boyfriends. "The first music I was really exposed to as a kid was Elvis Presley," he says. "I remember my family went on holiday to Morocco and my sister met this French teddy boy, with whom she had a brief affair, and he really turned me on to rockabilly and early rock 'n' roll." Years later, after his family had emigrated from England to the U.S., another sister's boyfriend handed him a guitar and taught him his first chords. In short order he fell in love with the idea of writing songs.

"It was thoroughly unexpected," says the 39-year-old Greenrod, who settled in Chicago in 1998. "A year before I started playing any music, it would've been the last thing I ever thought would happen. . . . It always seemed like something other people did."

A wiry six foot four, Greenrod performs under the name the Thin Man, lending his rolling basso voice to narrative tunes that balance eloquent melancholy with sly drollery and barbed wit. (By day he works for a contractor and delivers the *Reader*.) *Greasy Heart*, the third Thin Man album, came out last month on the local Contraphonic label, and Greenrod and his band will celebrate its release at Schubas this Friday. Like his past efforts, the new disc has a junk-shop goth aesthetic and a wagonload of skewed carnival sounds, but it also draws on the anglicized R & B and country of fellow Englishmen like Ian Dury, Graham Parker, and Wreckless Eric.

Born in Newcastle, Greenrod was adopted by a family that moved all over southeast England—Sussex, London, Cleethorpes. He came to Ventura, California, in 1983, after his mother married an American aeronautics engineer. Though he'd become an avid fan of English rock in his teens—the Jam, Elvis Costello, much of the Stiff Records roster—Greenrod didn't start making music himself until he was nearly 20.

Greenrod moved north to the Bay Area to attend UC Berkeley in 1984, and began playing and singing in a handful of local bands—most notably a noisy surrealist outfit called Eraser-gun. Later he drummed with the Vulvettes,

a primitive art-punk group that still has a cult following—last year they reunited in San Francisco for a one-off show to celebrate the posthumous release of *This Is the Science We Believe In* on the A Frames' Dragnet label.

Toward the end of his time in California, Greenrod took up the accordion, which has since become a key part of his music's sound. "I think people have the impression that I had a seafaring uncle or something who played me chanteys on the accordion as a kid," he says—an impression he used to encourage by bringing a painting of a sad-eyed old ship's captain onstage during Thin Man shows and addressing it like a coconspirator. (The painting also appears on the cover of his 2004 release, *H.M.S. Mondegreen*.) "But really, the Pogues was the first band that got me excited about the instrument. Then I fell in love with Tom Waits's music, and that made me decide I actually wanted to learn how to play."

Eraser-gun released its only full-length in 1996 and broke up shortly thereafter. Greenrod says he'd grown tired of the musical compromises he had to make in the band, and he'd been stockpiling tunes that didn't fit its aesthetic. In the fall of '98, soon after moving to Chicago, he debuted that material (and the Thin Man name) with a solo show at Phyllis' Musical Inn.

For the next year Greenrod played alone—he'd originally hoped to be a one-man band—but he eventually realized he couldn't get the sound he wanted that way and started working with a revolving cast of musicians. On the Thin Man's 2000 debut, *A Cloud in Trousers*, the lineup includes violinist Jessica Billey, who's played with Smog, and sometime We Ragazzi drummer Timothy McConville, and *H.M.S. Mondegreen* features Bright Eyes sideman Nate Walcott on trumpet. Onstage Greenrod has fronted lineups ranging from a cinematic seven-piece mini orchestra to a stripped-down cocktail-hour combo of upright bass and drums. His current backing band—Jason LaBrosse on double bass, banjo, and fiddle, Mike McGrath on drums, and Saleem Dhamee (of Grimble Grumble) on lead guitar and organ—has been playing together for more than a year and a half, and it's his most muscular and consistent yet. (At Friday's show a few past collaborators will join in, including Alan Scalpone of the Bitter Tears on trumpet and sax.)

In summer 2004 the quartet began recording *Greasy Heart* with engineer

Jeff Boyd, working at Phantom Manor and Kingsize. "We got the basic tracks done in two weekends," says Greenrod. "But then with scheduling difficulties and money difficulties it ended up taking another year and a half to complete. It was absurd."

Its long gestation period notwithstanding, *Greasy Heart* sounds loose and fresh. The diminished emphasis on noirish ambience and sideshow imagery helps the band display its range. "If I trust the musicians, I like to see what happens when the songs are out of my hands and in theirs," says Greenrod. "This particular album is more of a rock 'n' roll record as a result. That naturally made sense with this lineup. . . . I like that each of the albums feel different."

Greasy Heart announces its difference with the full-bodied brass on the opening cut, "My City," as well as with the hard-driving train beat of "Molly O" and the soulful burn of "The Wrong Song." The Thin Man's dark heart is still intact, though: "Louisiana Death Ride" is a twisted Gypsy rave-up about a sadistic hangman ("He don't like to make it quick / He likes to make 'em dance a little"), and "More Than Miles" is a creeping blues number with a protagonist who pines for the day he'll meet his betrothed again in the afterlife.

At shows the group applies its cock-eyed sensibility to a selection of covers that reflects its affection for classic rock, writerly pop, and Celtic and blues influences—the Kinks' "Harry Rag," Neil Young's "Don't Cry No Tears," the Pogues' "Streams of Whiskey"—and the highlight of the new album is another well-chosen cover. The band puts its stamp on Nina Simone's "Keeper of the Flame," adding ghostly reverb and spooky organ trills to Greenrod's somnambulant vocals. "I don't feel like what we're doing is that original on its own," he says, "but the way we put it all together is."

Three albums in, the Thin Man has managed only one east-coast tour and some long weekends in the midwest. With Contraphonic's support, the group plans to turn over a new leaf in 2006 and push *Greasy Heart* with extensive road work. "I'm maybe more ambitious than it would appear from our lack of touring," says Greenrod. "Having come to music sort of late in life, maybe I don't have such a rabid hunger for the careerist aspects of it. I just feel like if I keep writing good songs, there's a certain faith that things will happen in their own time." ■