

the weakerthans

Winnipeg rockers continue to agitate and entertain after 11 years

RODNEY WILSON | CIN WEEKLY CONTRIBUTOR

Our Canadian neighbors to the north have a very rich musical history, contributing countless tunesmiths to the global music collection, from Paul Anka to Bryan Adams to Skid Row's hairman, Sebastian Bach. And the current indie music scene seems particularly susceptible to this Canadian invasion, with acts including Arcade Fire, Feist and New Pornographers exporting songs that consistently show up on iPods.

This ubiquity of quality Canadian performers in modern music does beg the question – is there something in the water up there that keeps the Canadian countrymen and women churning out great songs?

'DIFFICULT TO KILL'

John Samson, songwriter and frontman for seminal Winnipeg band The Weakerthans, has a theory – and it's not the water.

"It's simply more difficult in America," Samson says. "If I didn't have medical coverage covered by the government, I don't know that I would be doing what I'm doing today. It makes me weary and depressed that so many American artists have been thwarted by that simple necessity of survival, and how in Canada it's easier to survive and therefore easier to make art."

This kind of comment – enlightening and incisive – is common from Samson, who started the band 11 years ago after leaving the agit-prop punk band, Propagandi. Samson's political observations tend to be filtered through the human experience, the impact that large-scale decisions have on his friends and neighbors.

"The way that I write politically is pretty atomic, really cellular – I take the smallest thing and try to extrapolate," he says.

Samson's lyrics are, indeed, focused and ideologically compact. They're also peppered with literary characters more likely to crop up in a Raymond Carver short story than a rock song. (It comes as no surprise that Samson has run Arbeiter Ring Publishing for the past 11 years.)

A cat named Virtute, overly critical of its emotionally damaged owner; a bus driver with a compelling inner narrative; the lament of a post-career curler. These figures and more are the cornerstones of *Reunion Tour*, the Weakerthans' fourth album in their 11-year career and a musically adventurous turn for a band that seamlessly blends punk, folk and indie.

"I mostly write about the place that I'm from and try to make the specifics of that universal," Samson says. "In a way, I think of it as a political act – in our culture of homogenization and globalization, the unique parts of the place you're from and the person you become are even more valuable. I hope that others can listen to the songs that I'm writing and think about the place that they're from and the community that they live in and think about the unique greatness of those things."

"Any art that reveals or explores or amplifies the life of someone you don't know is an accomplishment – it makes us more politically aware of the way that someone else thinks and lives, and I think that's a very political act," he says. "Once



BADOKS KEYNOLDS

Songwriter/frontman John Samson (second from right) and his band The Weakerthans head to the Mad Hatter March 28.

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: The Weakerthans with Christine Fellows and AA Bondy

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday, March 28

WHERE: Mad Hatter, 620 Scott St., Covington

PRICE: \$15

PARKING: On street or free in small adjacent lot

CONTACT: 859-291-2233, www.madhatterclub.com or www.cincyticket.com

you're able to relate and empathize with another person – which is what art does – it makes it much more difficult to kill them. I think it's fundamentally true."

REUNION TOUR

When you see John Samson and his fellow Weakerthans (drummer Jason Tait, guitarist Stephen Carroll, bassist Greg Smith), give them an encouraging smile – they've been on the road for the better part of 11 years.

"It's wonderful and awful," Samson says. "Parts of it – mostly that hour and a half that you get to be on stage and try to communicate and play the songs and make them walk around – that makes the rest of it totally worthwhile. To be able to do that as a job is great. Being away from family, the pull it takes on your body and mind, that can be very distressing and very gloomy."

STRONG INFLUENCES

John Samson of The Weakerthans is known for literate, compelling lyrical narratives. The singer and Arbeiter Ring Publishing founder reveals three authors who have influenced him.

GEORGE SAUNDERS: "American short story writer who's had a huge impact on the way I think about the world. He writes incredible stories."

JOHN BERGER: "Impossible to categorize. He's written novels, poetry, criticism – really every genre I can think of – and written incredibly well. And he's one of those writers that politics is just an intrinsic fact."

LORI MOORE: "My role model for the greatest turns of phrase that I can think of – really concise, beautiful, profound ... and funny. I think it's important that there's a sense of whimsy in people's work, and she's a great example of that."