



by JJ Koczan

I had been trying to reach Mike Wiebe, singer for Austin, TX's The Riverboat Gamblers, for the past couple of days. There were some voicemails back and forth. "Hey Mike, this is *The Aquarian Weekly* calling from NJ for the 4 p.m. interview, please call back..." and "Hey JJ, this is Mike from The Riverboat Gamblers, sorry about that, please call back..." These kinds of things happen all the time.

With Wiebe though, the situation is different. Home from one tour and about to start another, he's spending most of his time in and out of medical clinics for treatment of a hand he broke in early May at the Bamboozle. At one point, when our schedules finally coincided, he ended the conversation abruptly:

"The doctor's coming out, I'll call you back."

Wiebe's hand isn't the first in the line of Gamblers injuries. The reckless punk rock tradition so clearly audible in the band's garage-esque sound is also readily viewed in their live show. Reports have members hanging from ceilings, falling off stages and climbing scaffolding. Of course, it's all fun and games till someone gets hurt.

To *The Confusion Of Our Enemies*, the second full-length from The Riverboat Gamblers, was released earlier this year through Volcom—a label the band decided to call home after rejecting numerous major label contracts. Though somewhat smoother than its predecessor *Something To Crow About* (at least partially due to the production of Mudrock, known for more commercial-friendly work), *Confusion* nonetheless maintains a rough exterior and element of bombast.

When we finally spoke, Wiebe was considerably more subdued than he sounds on record.

What do you do with the hand now?

"I'm going to have a cast and I play guitar, but I don't play live, so I guess I'm going to just have to try.

It's going to hamper things a little bit, but I managed to do the several shows afterwards and even the show where it was really, really hurt. I managed to do the whole show. I'll be a little less active, but not much. I'll try and work with it, adapt, improvise. (laughs)

You guys have a bit of a reputation for a crazy live show and injuries, apparently well-earned. Do you ever feel any pressure to be crazy on stage?

There's definitely a pressure when people throw around stuff about how good the live show is and stuff like that. I always feel it has to be energetic and entertaining.

The goal never is to hurt myself. That's never been a goal, that's just something that comes out of being excitable and clumsy at the same time. That's just what it is and I don't know if that's a draw at all.

I definitely have a mission to try and keep it exciting and entertaining, so yeah, I've thought about that before, like, I can't keep hurting myself like this. This reinforces that. I'm getting older and it's starting to take longer to heal and shit. But I think there's a way to do it and keep it energetic and exciting and fun and loose, but I guess this is just going to come with it sometimes.

If I wasn't doing this I'd probably be skateboarding and hurting myself even more, so fuck it.

Well, if it's got to be one or the other at least you have a bunch of people watching.

Yeah, exactly.

Are you ever worried at all that the spectacle takes away from the music?

Yeah, I have thought about that occasionally, but I've seen some bands that it was just spectacle and nothing else to back it up, and we definitely want to try and

have the whole package. I hope it's there.

People seem to respond to the songs, and there's definitely a lot of work gone into the songs. We'll see, with this being a little bit tied down, if people are still as responsive. I hope so.

I think you could easily be on the other side where it's, 'Ah, they're just a studio band who aren't good live.' I think it could probably go either way for any band. 'Oh, they're a lot better on recording,' or something like that, but to be thought of as good in any arena is alright with me.

It seems to have worked for you guys too, with label offers and all that. Tell me about going to Volcom and staying indie.

In a lot of the people we talked to, it just seemed like Volcom didn't want to get their hands into the music too much, which was a pretty big deal for us.

And it wasn't even like a lot of the other people were saying, 'You have to write this kind of song or that kind of song,' but you could really feel there was going to be pressure to get a song sounding a certain way, and not so much someone in the studio telling you what to do, but if songs don't sound exactly how they want them to sound, it's not going to get the push because they don't think it's marketable or they could shelve it.

That's the kind of thing that could really be death for a band like us, not having anything to sell on the road or having an album get shelved. I guess that's death for any band, but for us, we didn't want anybody in there fiddling with what we do or telling us to change what we do, make it a certain way or make it specifically for radio.

At the same time though, the sound of the band has changed. You can hear the difference from one album to the next.

Oh, definitely. It is how we want it now. That's completely our choice. I think Volcom

would have been just as happy if we had made another record that sounded exactly like *Something To Crow About*, which is more lo-fi.

We had the opportunity to really take our time and make it sound how we wanted to sound right now, and we were able to do that, so we just went with it.

What was it like working with Mudrock?

It was good. On paper, he really probably wasn't the guy I would have picked initially, because he's worked with a lot of bands that do ProTools kinds of recordings, a lot slicker recordings, and we were looking for something that was going to be more raw.

But he was really excited about the band and he really chased us down and courted us, flew out on his own dime and spent a lot of time talking with us about music we like and what we were thinking as far as the record. He was just really excited about the band. We recorded all on tape and really worked hard to make the record we wanted to make, as opposed to what a producer is known for.

There's a lot of producers where, this is their style and they're going to put their style on your record, where he was more trying to make the best record he could with us.

Now that it's done and out, how do you feel about the way it's been received?

I'm really happy with it. I try to stay away from too many reviews, just because I think, good or bad, it's kind of an unreal thing to fill your head with. I read some and it seems like it's being received pretty well.

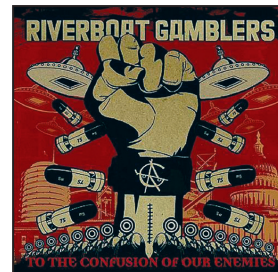
My general take on what people are hearing is that at first it kind of threw a lot of people, but they really like it after a while. That's what I'm hearing from my close friends that won't lie to me and will tell me it sucks if it does and have told me in the past that they haven't liked things I've done.

I try to stay away from too many of the internet reviews because it's just one person's opinion, but I can really start getting way too negative about it, or I'll get a great review and it'll say 'Yeah, I just don't like this one song,' and I'll be so bummed out. I haven't developed a thick enough skin for reviews and stuff like that, other than to be smart enough to not read them.

With all the post-SXSW buzz around the band, how are you feeling heading into the summer's tours?

I hope it goes good. I've definitely over the years learned not to believe in buzz too much, not to believe in the hype. And when you're in the middle of it, you don't really—I don't wake up every morning and go, 'Wow, that buzz feels good,' (laughs) 'It feels like a backrub.'

We're just working and doing our thing. Buzz definitely doesn't put any food on the table, at least initially anyway. I'm waiting to get out there and get to work, hopefully play in front of lots of people.



To The Confusion Of Our Enemies is available now through Volcom. The Riverboat Gamblers will be appearing live at CBGB's on May 31. For more info, check out theriverboatgamblers.com