

Behold, a new CD for MonkeyJunk

Ottawa blues band on a tear after prestigious award wins

By Lynn Saxberg, Ottawa Citizen June 18, 2011



Ottawa's MonkeyJunk are, from left, Tony Diteodoro, Steve Marriner, and Matt Sobb. The band is about to release its second album, To Behold.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen, Ottawa Citizen

The second-floor wine room of an Italian restaurant in the ByWard Market is cool and dimly lit, a sharp contrast to the sundrenched hustle and bustle outside on a Saturday afternoon. Members of the Ottawa blues trio MonkeyJunk have celebrated many memorable occasions in the private room; an empty supersized champagne bottle in the corner is a souvenir of the last one.

On this afternoon, however, the room serves as a quiet place for an interview. The band is gearing up for the release of their second album, and the pressure is on to follow up their 2009 debut, *Tiger in your Tank*. It was a surprise hit that helped the band earn a slew of Maple Blues Awards, and even a prestigious Blues Music Award from the U.S. blues community. They play the Tim Hortons Dragon Boat Festival Sunday.

The new album, *To Behold*, will come out on Stony Plain Records, the respected Canadian roots label run by Holger Petersen, who also hosts CBC Radio's Saturday Night Blues program. The deal gives the band worldwide distribution and access to a mighty marketing campaign. For guitarist Tony Diteodoro, drummer Matt Sobb and singer-multi-instrumentalist Steve Marriner, a new album on a highprofile label means they must have had to get serious about the music.

"This band was never a planned thing," says Sobb of the origins of MonkeyJunk. "The band came together so innocently. It kind of just fell together out of a fun gig at Irene's on Sunday. With the first record, stuff happened very spontaneously, but with this record, there was a little more care, a little more production put into it."

MonkeyJunk was born in 2008, inspired by the urge to give a fresh perspective on the old blues recordings that Marriner and Diteodoro enjoy. When Marriner began hosting an open stage at Irene's, he invited Diteodoro and Sobb to join him to put the musical plan into action. He came up with the name MonkeyJunk after the classic Son House line: "I'm talkin' 'bout the blues. I ain't talkin' 'bout monkey junk."

The chemistry among the three musicians, who have been friends for years, clicked into place, despite the difference in their ages (Marriner is in his late 20s, Sobb is in his late 30s and Diteodoro in his late 40s). Their camaraderie was obvious on stage, but it also came through in the intensity of the songs on *Tiger in Your Tank*.

The new album is even better, containing more original material, fuller arrangements and terrific singing. The band recorded it with engineer Ken Friesen in his Almonte-area studio, partly because Marriner liked the warm sound of the Chaffey Brothers' album, another Friesen project.

"Other engineers have their minds made up about how things have to be done, what the rules are," says Marriner, who usually serves as the spokesman for the band. "Ken will

try anything to achieve any sound. He's fearless. He won't surrender to these predisposed notions of how things are supposed to be.

"And coming from the vocal perspective, he worked me harder than anyone else I have ever worked with. We needed someone who's critical, especially when I like to have my hands in that side of it. You want a guy who will give you the goods."

Another big difference with the new album was the work that went into the songwriting. The musicians went into it with a desire to write more songs and develop a unique sound without straying too far from their blues roots.

"What happened was we had a lot of lyrics and riffs and guitar lines floating around that we had been incorporating into other songs, and then they turned into original numbers. We just wrote the lyrics," says Diteodoro. Nine of the 10 songs on the new album are original; the tenth is a Hank Williams cover, You're Going to Change (Or I'm Going to Leave).

"We decided to stop worrying about whether it's bluesy enough," says Marriner. "We just kind of trusted our guts, and this is the result."

MONKEYJUNK

CD release concert: 8 p.m., Wednesday, June 22, Barrymore's Music Hall, 323 Bank St. With special guest Kelly Prescott.

Tickets: \$20 advance, available at Compact Music and www.worldfamousmusic.net

Tim Hortons Ottawa Dragon Boat

Festival: 3: 15 p.m., Sunday, June 19, Liquid Lounge Stage, Mooney's Bay Park. Free admission.