

powertakeOff: Volume as Therapy

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Gus Engstrom's been on the Charlotte music scene for 20+ years, and the Kansas native's entire tenure has been marked by a grain-fed Midwestern pleasantness. Upbeat, gregarious, a cool dude. So how could his powertakeOff project produce such a roiling, gut-punched, *pissed off* debut album? "Basically, I worked on it for two years instead of going to therapy," he says, grinning.



That makes sense. On the new LP *this is late*, PTO's primordial thump combines the best of scary Am Rep fury rock (Hammerhead, Cows) with serious sub-sonics, samples (Native American ritual, voice mail message) and guest pedal steel and trumpet that add a fresh, eerie, dimension. It's almost concept-album in feel, with interesting seams tunneling beneath the sensory assault.

The album – from the music to the lyrics to your vocal delivery – feels really cathartic to me. Is that a fair description?

Yes, that's very fair. In February 2013 I got really sick when we were about to go into the studio. It was a miserable time for me in some ways, but the best in others. Our guitarist left also left. During that time I wrote a bunch of new songs and reworked older songs. Rewriting the record was the best thing that could have happened. I wanted it to have the same feel I was feeling personally at the time. I wanted to create a sonic monster: loud, heavy, with a lot of low-end, but melodic in the right places.

Your guitar and bass tones are just crushing. What kind of amps did you use? Did you set a dB level record for the studio?

We recorded loud but not as loud as you would expect. It was no *Jerusalem* ---haha. We used a 70's Sunn model T into a 4x12 and a hardwired Vox AC 15 for guitar. For bass, I played an Ampeg Blue Line SVT into an 8x10 cabinet, and a Marshall 3560 bass head into a 2x15 cab.

Recording details?

We recorded in Athens, GA, at Ronnie Jones Sound with Kyle Spence of Harvey Milk. The band was myself (bass/ vocals/samples), Matt Culler (drums/samples) and Adam Marx (guitar/samples). I chose Kyle for many reasons. I recorded there before with my old Charlotte band GRIDS (R.I.P.). You'd be hard-pressed to find another studio that can get you these sounds for the price.



Did the pedal steel guitar parts on "Where I Am" and "Man It Smells Great in Here" come together in the studio, or did you have that beforehand?

My ultimate goal was pedal steel, but I knew the problem was going to be finding the "right" guy who would be into it. That sound had been in my head for sometime. After we recorded,

I mentioned it, and Kyle said: "We can make that happen, I know John Neff. He played with the Drive By Truckers."

What about the trumpet for "Some Gave All" and "Time's Up"?

The trumpet was planned. I asked Creston Spiers (also of Harvey Milk) to play trumpet. He said, "I'll give you the best I have in me," which was funny, because Creston went to the Peabody Conservatory and can play pretty much anything.

When we first started talking about the record you made a comment to the effect of: people probably didn't think you had it in you to do this. Do you think you're perceived more as a fan/booster/booker/sideman, rather than a songwriter or bandleader?

I did play that role for a long time in this scene and I think most of the older people remember me that way. I think a lot of younger folks have no idea that I booked shows and helped bring bands to town since 1995-ish. And I think a few people are aware of me playing in Horse Thief and GRIDS.

But I was referring to the fact that I wasn't in an active band after the demise of GRIDS and wasn't being asked to be in any bands, and with no one in mind to form a band, I'd be writing most, if not all the material. I'd basically have to do everything myself. Plus, this is the first band I've done vocals. The mere idea of me fronting a band is frightful to think about. I've never done it before this band. So I think people might have doubted whether I could pull off everything.

Talk about your writing process

A lot of what I wanted to accomplish was not to rewrite what's been done before. This kind of music (heavy, loud) is far too often seen as one-dimensional. I know I'm not the one to rewrite history; I just wanted to put out something that had a unique feel.

You've already recorded a follow-up, right?

Not a follow-up, really. They're songs I wrote early on as a demo for the LP, but they ended up not really fitting on it. We recorded them with Rick Contes. They're just out on cassette titled *Unhinged*.

***powertakeOff* is touring this fall. The debut album "This is Late" is available at www.learningcurverecords.bandcamp.com/album/this-is-late . The "Unhinged" cassette is available at www.power-take-off.bandcamp.com/album/unhinged .**