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Radio Who?

Hailed as a successor to Radiohead, Granddaddy makes great music while looking to the good old days

By Jessica Parker

published: August 16, 2000

Ninety miles or so east of San Francisco, the jarring sight of twin smokestacks erupts from the Northern California scenery, interrupting the placid backdrop of vineyards, blue sky and the Sierra Nevada. The imposing concrete pillars are remnants of the now-defunct nuclear power plant in Rancho Seco, a manmade monument slowly being absorbed by the quiet countryside it invaded. A graveyard for one of the many American dreams this country has awakened from in the past 50 years, the site is eerie, made even more bizarre by the fact that this former plant now boasts a park and

campgrounds. A few miles from the former plant is a small town called Modesto, home of the five members of Granddaddy. With the group's recent V2 Records release, *The Sophtware Slump*, Granddaddy is already being called the "new American Radiohead," an honor every bit as clumsy as it sounds. Still, it's not hard to see the parallel. Granddaddy also sings about robots and has a killer melodic sense and an affinity for tragic, sweeping epics. In fact, the irony of a power plant-turned-recreational park is something one might expect to hear about in the next Granddaddy song. Much press attention has been given to the fact that this enigmatic group producing this reflective, sophisticated music hails from Modesto. Of course, with a population of more than 180,000 - - and counting -- Modesto ain't exactly the Beverly Hillbillies' backyard. But obviously it lacks the metropolitan flair of San

Gary Sims



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Francisco.

The members of Granddaddy, however, are mostly satisfied living in Modesto. The band formed in 1992 with Jason Lytle at the helm, writing and recording from his makeshift home studio. All five members of Granddaddy -- Lytle, bassist Kevin Garcia, drummer Aaron Burtch, keyboardist Tim Dryden and guitarist Jim Fairchild -- were raised in Modesto. Yet Fairchild, low-key and articulate, reveals that staying in Modesto "gets less likely all the time.

Would Granddaddy possess the same bewitching, thoughtful charm had its members not weathered the Modesto experience? Would Lytle still write about the clash of mud and metal, nature and commerce? Fairchild isn't sure how much the group's environment has influenced Lytle's songwriting and the band's music. He's not even sure he'd want to know.

"I think it's completely intrinsic," he says in a typically unassuming yet meditative manner. "This environment probably influences us in ways that none of us are 100 percent aware of. If you come from places like this and have that work ethic instilled in you and the need for simplicity and appreciation for the outdoors, I don't think there's any way you could escape being influenced by that. It crops up in music lyrically, thematically and sonically in ways I don't even want to be completely

aware of. I think sometimes when you can put your finger on whatever it is that people perceive as magic, you do yourself a disservice. I think there's got to be some ethereal qualities to it that nobody's really aware of."

These "ethereal qualities" were manifest even on Granddaddy's previous LP, the first for V2, *Under the Western Freeway*. The first track, "Nonphenomenal Lineage," transmits the band's originality with its warbly guitar and droning synth and Lytle's wistful, high voice not quite hitting the notes. The song details the routine dismissal of someone "who came up rather short of the average sort" compared with the "gifted hands" that receive "the chance to touch down on fortune." Lytle's delicate voice barely pierces the propulsive backbeat and gentle guitar melody, until the album launches into the distorted, Weezer-like "A.M. 180."

Fairchild underestimates the grandeur of *Western Freeway*, calling it jagged and nonlinear. Gems like "Everything Beautiful Is Far Away," with its intriguing narrative of a smoking cave-dweller who sees swans on "shores of a pale white lake," reveal this album's value even next to the stellar *Sophtware Slump*. As in many Granddaddy songs, Lytle muses on alienation and estrangement in a world of technological advancement at the cost of humanity. "Go Progress Chrome" reveals the singer's preference for "how it's always been" in view of those who want to "paint the moon today some brand-new future color." Lytle's lyrics may seem paranoid, but they're not so far-fetched. *New Scientist* magazine reported that two advertising executives in London are working on a plan to use reflected sunlight to project advertisements onto the surface of the moon.

Granddaddy's music flows well -- waxing and waning, pushing and pulling. Two-thirds of Granddaddy's songs are slight, tragic epics; the rest are made up of electric, cathartic rock. It's a sonic marriage employed by like-minded bands, including the Flaming Lips and, yes, Radiohead. Fairchild confronts the inevitable comparisons head-on.

"We have a constant eye toward development," he begins. "There are only so many bands out there that are trying to make rich, orchestrated music, and once you throw in a sensitivity toward relationships with humans, the development and the comparison gets clearer. But we're not trying to become the new Radiohead," he concludes emphatically.

The Sophtware Slump might not be *OK Computer*, but it's nearly as haunting musically and lyrically. The album's theme is the creation and degeneration of "Jed the Humanoid." As the songs reveal, Jed - or Jeddy 3, as he's first known -- was assembled in the kitchen from "failed clones and odd parts." Jed's inventors delighted in his ability to run, walk, sing, think and talk. Eventually Jed got into the booze, and he "fizzled and popped, he rattled and knocked, and finally he just stopped." Like a nightmare of a nursery rhyme, Lytle makes keen commentary with tongue still firmly in cheek. Rather than lapsing into a lengthy diatribe about Jed's significance in relation to modern man, both Lytle and Fairchild simply play the song off as being about how "alcohol and machinery don't mix too well." Right.

Granddaddy's smugness isn't limited to interviews, either. Like an impudent child testing the boundaries with a stern parent, the band sent V2 a phony tape of the new album just to "shake things up." Further capitalizing on their sense of humor, the band broadcast some of the phony songs after performances in Europe.

"The first three songs were sort of listenable," says Fairchild. "They kind of have a melody and little story in the lyrics and deal with robots -- which are touchstones of what they expect out of us. Needless to say, V2 was not pleased, and audiences were simply perplexed.

The real *Sophtware Slump*, however, is a fully developed, rich drama of an album. The disc pushes off

with the tranquil, sweet-sounding "He's Simple, He's Dumb, He's the Pilot." With erratic bleeps and foreboding, chorale-like strings, the song ebbs and flows beautifully. Reaching the climax and the refrain, Lytle whines, "Did you love this world and this world not love you?" to the "2000 Man" who lost his maps and plans. Later, the narrator encourages 2000 Man not to give in, as the song's trebly melody finally bursts into a rumbling piano dirge.

Though Fairchild bristles at the word "cinematic," that's exactly what this album is; the bright, up-tempo songs are the action sequences, and the lulling, pensive songs are the dramatic dialogue scenes.

But, as with almost everything that surrounds Grandaddy, it's not quite so simple. The beauty of the lively sounding songs is that they're still dark lyrically. "Broken Household Appliance National Forest" describes meadows polluted with microwaves, air conditioners and vacuum bags. The animals inhabit the land, with owls flying out of oven doors and frogs housing in refrigerators. The song is alternately peaceful and jaunty, illustrating the contrast of "flowers that reside with filthy rags." "Jed's Other Poem (Beautiful Ground)" has a weaving organ melody and details Jed's demise "lower than ground, beautiful ground." Lytle seems to find beauty in the sadness and pathetic end of all his characters. The radiance of his music is in the haunting refrains, the sparse odd notes, the flourishes under layers of fuzz and distortion that become the highlights of the songs.

Despite all evidence to the contrary -- the CD artwork, which the band created, displays fragmented Macintosh keyboards filled with dirt and rubble -- Fairchild insists that Grandaddy's ethic is not anti-technology but a constant questioning of how necessary anything is. The necessity of the Rancho Seco power plant didn't last. Let's hope Grandaddy's music does.

