

MUSIC

Earnin' his keep

No. 2's Neil Gust is so not famous

BY TJ NORRIS

Neil Gust, the gay lead singer and guitarist of Portland indie rock group No. 2, is a tall and slim bald guy, dressed with clean black lines and no off-putting attitude—refreshing in the sometimes vacuous world of music personalities.

The Ohio native has been in Portland for several years, having formerly played in the popular band Heatmiser alongside Elliott Smith and Sam Coomes. He took the time to hang out for a cup of joe and talk about his new CD, *What Does Good Luck Bring?*, icons, record covers, Lawrence Welk and what it's like to earn his keep.

TJ Norris: How'd you come up with the name No. 2?

Neil Gust: It's the second band I was in...my first band, we were signed to Virgin Records, and when we broke up we did a demo of my new music to see if they wanted to...keep me on the label. It was mostly just me playing, and I just wrote No. 2 on it.... A band name is something you think about the first week and forget about.

TJN: Did you grow up in Oregon?

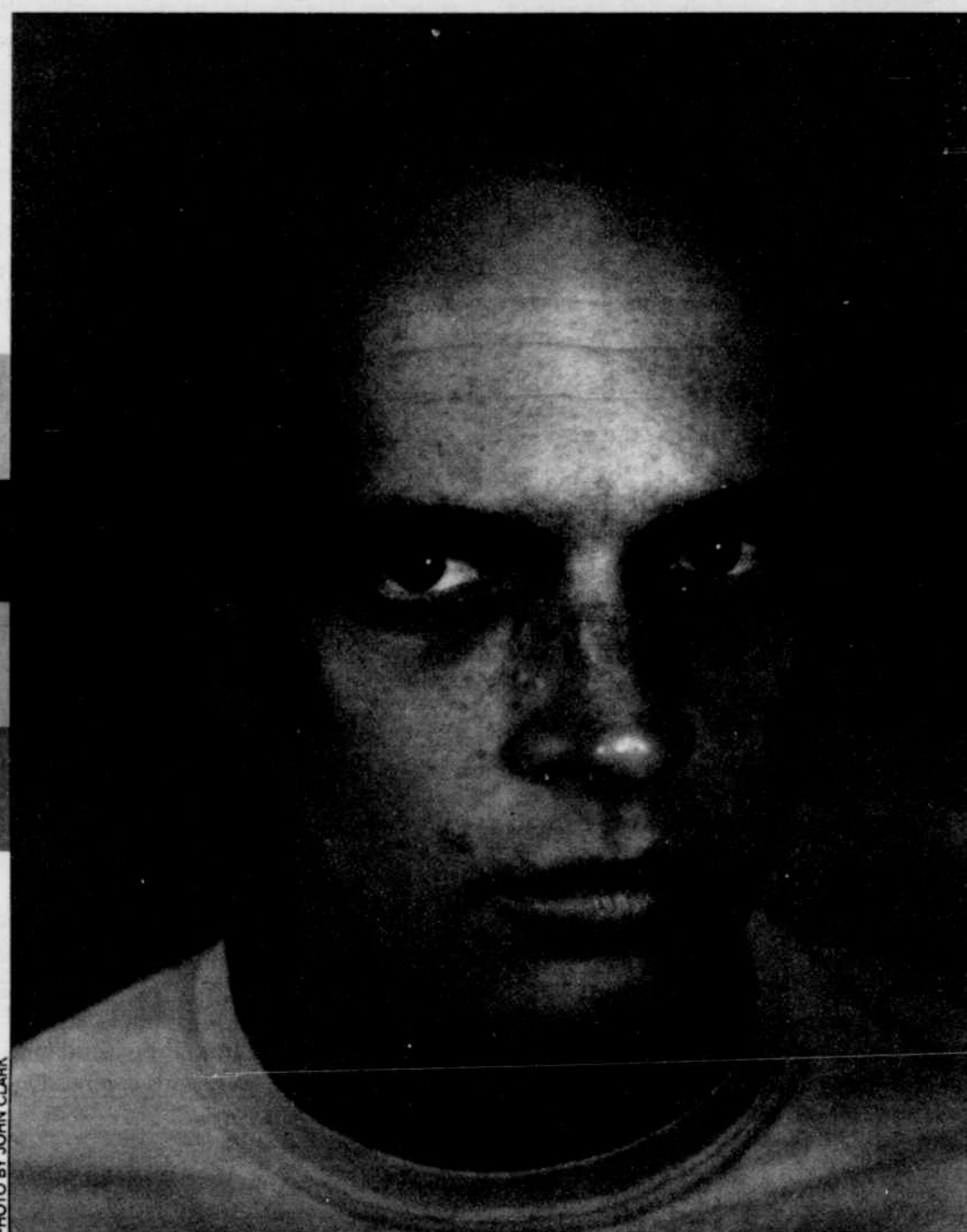
NG: I grew up in Iowa City, and then I went to college in Amherst [Mass.] and then moved to Portland. I went to school with Elliott, and we played music together the entire time we were in college, and the summer before we graduated we decided we wanted to be in a band. Um, we picked Portland over Chicago. Those were the only two places we were thinking about moving. It seemed easier to move to Portland because he had some friends here. It was a very casual decision.

TJN: For the ubiquitous question—and please don't tell me you are a Lawrence Welk fan—but you're gay, right?

NG: Yeah! Am I a Lawrence Welk fan? I would have to say [pauses] yes.... I have a whole history with Lawrence Welk. My grandfather used to spread newspapers on the ground in front of the television set, and my brothers and sisters would dance to Lawrence Welk.... I can't hate Lawrence Welk. I don't understand how [he] could be a gay icon. Is it a lesbian thing?

TJN: Is there a connection between your sexuality and what ends up in the music?

NG: Yes! Music, it's very personal.... It necessitates music to be something that I really understand and am. So it ends up having a point of view that is mine, which is, among other things, a gay man.... If somebody connects with that, that's amazing! I personally connect to all sorts of music...all types of art



Neil Gust fronts No. 2 at Berbati's Pan on Oct. 16

that feels human. That's what I strive for. Humans are complicated, and that's why they are beautiful.

TJN: Queer guy rockers like Freddie Mercury, etc. have painted the canvas as we know it. Do you feel any kinship with them?

NG: No, because what I do is on a much smaller scale than what someone like Freddie Mercury accomplished. When you talk about him in this context you talk about him as an icon, and I am not an icon. I am just a guy from Portland; it's apples and oranges. I am not on a path to giant gay rockers. I sit at home,

and I record. I go to band practice in basements, and we work songs out...and never break even. We do it because it is something that propels our lives along in a positive way.

TJN: Is there any significance to the location of the shoot on the cover image of the new album?

NG: Oh, very much! [Laughs] The cover starts in a claustrophobic space at nighttime and opens up to the Pacific Northwest outdoors. It's all video. It has a lot to do with cruising. I tried to evoke that the music is happening in plain view but under surveillance so

also hidden. In that sense, it's very gay. That's what we were trying to do. It could be a bathroom or a subway; it's subterranean....

TJN: Who are your favorite musicians?

NG: I love the Rolling Stones.... All this stuff happened around them, beautiful record covers by Andy Warhol and Robert Frank.... They got this whole world, they did it. I love R.E.M. for the same thing. I don't listen to them as much anymore, but when I was a kid they were my band.

Now I love Queens of the Stone Age—they are kind of mystifying. Flaming Lips are really good, and I like my friends that play. I like Quasi, I like Sleater-Kinney, I love Elliott's music.

TJN: Is there something about community in music?

NG: The next record that No. 2 makes will probably be with a different set of musicians. Bands are always in flux. Sometimes you gotta go back to the pool of people who want to play with each other. So, yes, community is essential, because bands are very unstable and constantly changing. That's one of the exciting things about it.... That's a fundamental way of keeping a life in music—rediscovering old things.

TJN: Do you have a boyfriend?

NG: I sort of do. It's a long-distance relationship, so it's open. He's not really a boyfriend, but he's very, very special.

TJ: Do you see yourself doing collaborations or presenting your music in other formats?

NG: Yes. But I think I don't know how it's gonna work. There will be a visual element to it. There is something iconic, cinematic, fucking cool about album covers. That's the power of records—they influence an entire culture of people.

TJN: So, what's next in your life?

NG: We're going on tour.... In November I want to record a demo of these songs I have been doing all summer and then start making our next record. Who it's going to be and what type of music it will be, I am not entirely sure of yet. It's the most exciting time where the possibilities are endless. [J]

No. 2 plays *Berbat's Pan*, 231 S.W. Ankeny St., with the *French Kicks and Telephone* at 9:30 p.m. Oct. 16. Tickets are \$7 from *Fastixx* or at the door.

TJ NORRIS is a writer and artist who just opened the new gallery *Soundvision* in Northwest Portland.

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