



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

The Woolen Men – from left, Alex Geddes, Rafael Spielman and Lawton Browning – released their latest album, “Temporary Monument,” in the fall.

‘Wave of optimism’ amid Portland’s gentrification

The Woolen Men’s work has been inspired by their changing hometown, whose residents and music venues are being displaced from the inner city. Yet the musicians see a community spirit that brings them hope.

BY JASON COHEN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In April, The Woolen Men were set to play the VFW on Southeast Mill Street, an occasional but stalwart non-traditional venue for punk rock bands, art films and more than a few bagpipers. The gig was a record release party for the Portland label See My Friends’ compilation “Secret City, Volume 1,” with The Woolen Men headlining as (slightly) elder statesmen on the 10-band bill. Mere days before the show, the label had to scramble for a new location on a different date. The building had been sold and all bookings canceled without warning.

This was both disappointing and appropriate, since See My Friends had described “Secret City, Volume 1” as “a product of rapidly gentrifying inner SE PDX.” On top of that, the Woolen Men’s most recent album, the frustrated, furious and thoroughly catchy “Temporary Monument,” takes a great deal of its thematic inspiration from the current state of the city.

“Our hometown has been buried under an avalanche of condos and pointless businesses catering to the newly rich,” the band wrote when the record first came out on New York indie label Woodsist last September. “Noise complaints shut down our shows and pulled the plug on countless DIY venues. The places where we lived are being torn down; the rent keeps climbing up. Born too soon or too late, the recession’s effect on our youth was as invisible as it was profound. Music today is rendered powerless – white noise made in the echo chamber, for the great Smooth Face that gazes once and moves on.”

The Portland trio – guitarist Lawton Browning, drummer Rafael Spielman, and bassist Alex Geddes – didn’t set out to make a concept record, and “Temporary Monument” isn’t one. Many of its songs are as ambiguous and open to interpretation as the tarot cards on the back cover.

“But living here and being part of a community, it was hard to ignore that stuff,” Spielman said.

And “that stuff” turned out to be an irresistible media hook, since what’s happening in Portland is happening in just about every city. The subject matter resonated with journalists, left-of-the-dial DJs and other bands the Woolen Men encountered while on tour.

“I liked that,” Browning said. “We could talk about what’s happening here, and people could share their own stories about what was happening to them.”

The Woolen Men’s perspective on their city comes in part from the fact that it really is *their* city. While Geddes is from Newport, Wash., Browning and Spielman are both Portland natives, graduates of Lincoln High School – in 2002 and 2003, respectively – who have lived here all their lives except for college and played in local bands since they were teens.

“I feel like it’s a little bit easier for us to talk about these issues because (most) everybody is from somewhere else,”

See WOOLEN MEN, page 5