

BLITZEN TRAPPER, from page 9

includes several of the band's old favorites where they seemed thematically or dramatically apt (along with the aforementioned snippet of "Black River Killer," "Astronaut" is particularly prominent). And in the four months between the JAW Festival and a new round of rehearsals, Earley couldn't stop himself from writing songs in general.

"It's my usual process," he said. "Just keep making stuff, and it will all work out in the end."

Just as the members of Blitzen Trapper bring Earley's songwriting and home recordings to life in a different way in the studio and live, "Wild and Reckless" takes that process further, adding directors, a set and costume designer and modest special effects.

"You're only focused on one thing making a record," Blitzen Trapper guitarist Erik Menteer said. "It's just the sonics of it. Whereas in the theater world, we have to make sure everything visually is working out and that everybody's acting intention is correct."

Besides Earley, three other members of the band have speaking roles. Menteer plays Joey, another "dust" user connected to Carbonell's character, The Girl. Koch and multi-instrumentalist Marty Marquis are, respectively, The Scientist and The Professor, who both serve as something of Greek chorus, filling in bits of the story. Michael Van Pelt sticks to his bass.

A big part of what Carbonell and Norby brought to the process was not just acting, but being able to fit in with the band as musicians. Carbonell plays quite a bit of keyboard in the show, and Norby learned how to play the congas.

"It's been pretty intimidating for me coming into this gig, truthfully," said Norby, who was also in "Astoria" and "Oregon Trail." "Blitzen Trapper is not only an amazing band, but a fully rounded group of individuals, both musically and artistically."

Having all the actors play an instrument adds to the sense that you are always watching a band as much as "characters."

"We kind of get the best of both worlds," said Carbonell, a Tualatin native who's spent most of her acting career in New York. "We get to pretend we are in this awesome band and fulfill a theater dream at the same time."

The overall effect is somewhere between British director John Doyle's Stephen Sondheim musicals, in which all the actors also play instruments, and the The Who's "Tommy," though Earley says his own inspirations were even simpler. As a songwriter, his touchstones are Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Townes Van Zandt, but for the pomp and bombast of the theater, he looked to '70s and '80s favorites like Judas Priest, Queen and even Bruce Springsteen.



PHOTO BY KATE SZROM

Bonnie Henderson-Winnie applies lightning scar makeup to Erik Menteer (*The Kid*).

"What we're doing is a sort of mini-arena show, with the lights and the projections and the movement," Earley said. Most of the band is also using Tom Cruise-in-"Mission Impossible"-style wireless microphones, which is both delightful and takes getting used to ("my belches are amplified," Earley joked during one early rehearsal).

Just having sets and a lighting designer at all makes the whole experience kind of a rock 'n' roll fantasy.

"Usually we just go to clubs and there's an in-house designer and they just wing it," Koch said.

Earley's character kicks off "Wild and Reckless" with a story that is basically his own.

"I'm telling totally true things," Earley said. "The whole show is this kind of active, animated memory."

During last fall's "Songbook" tour, one of the songs Blitzen Trapper covered was Elliot Smith's "Alameda," and Earley would talk about the fact that Smith's music was one of the things that inspired him to head up Interstate 5 and try playing music in Portland himself. "Wild and Reckless" harkens back to those years, as well as Blitzen Trapper's breakthrough period – a spot on Willamette Week's 2005 "Best New Bands" list, the release of the 2007 Pitchfork favorite "Wild Mountain Nation," and the subsequent record deal with Sub Pop.

That peak creative time for Earley was also a time when he was basically living on the street, albeit of his own accord.

"Things were so different back then," he said. "I made this conscious choice, like, all right, I'm not going to live anywhere. I'm just gonna kind of float."

The band was rehearsing at what's known in Blitzen Trapper lore as the "Telegraph Building" (originally the Pacific States Telephone and Telegraph Building) on Southeast Ankeny, which was somewhere between a storage space and squat.

"Half of it they were using; the other half, the roof was caved in," Earley said. "So you kind of had to watch where you stepped."

The building had been the home of Sally Mack's School of Dance, where, coincidentally, Carbonell took classes.

Earley was usually up all night, writing and recording, and would sleep outside during the day. Then, as now, the Springwater Corridor and the knoll by the Japanese American Historical Plaza were favored spots. If it rained, he went back to the building. "Wild and Reckless" includes many references to places that were touchstones for Earley or people he knew during that time, from the punk rock club Satyricon, which was almost at its end, to the Hooper detox center.

During this period from 2005 to 2007, Earley wrote and recorded both "Wild Mountain Nation" and 2008's "Furr," plus two albums' worth of largely unreleased material. (One of them is coming out as a limited-edition vinyl release in April, for Record Store Day.)

Then the band began its life of constant touring, which allowed Earley to be the same kind of vagabond, except now it was his job. Ten years of touring later, Earley can still remember the shock of coming back to a city that was changing as quickly as he wrote songs. "I can remember just being like, 'What? When did they build *this*? That place is closed?'" he said. "It was kind of stark to us, because we were on tour all the time."

And now the band has a career and gets to do something crazily ambitious and

exceedingly well-funded – at least by indie-rock standards – in a beautifully renovated Pearl District theater. An Old Portland show for New Portland. Oregon is the lifeblood of Blitzen Trapper's music and its vibe, right down to the dueling flags – blue-and-gold beaver and Cascadia – that Menteer and Marquis drape over their keyboards on tour. But success and touring literally takes you farther away from who you were, and literally farther away from home.

To the director, Earley's lack of theatrical experience – never even seen a play – was a huge plus, because he had no habits, expectations or boundaries.

"I think the coolest aspect of it is the fact that he has never been to the theater," Riordan said. "So the way he approached it was just, whatever he saw in his brain."

She also found him egoless – someone who knew what he wanted and wouldn't budge if something was important to him, but was still open to anything.

Blitzen Trapper has never even worked with a producer in the studio.

"It's a whole different buy-in, (to have) these outside folks that are working with the band for the first time," Marquis said.

But for PCS, it was like having a ready-made ensemble, so they just had to accommodate and nurture the band's existing dynamic until they were a part of it. One thing Riordan noticed right away was how few words the band members needed to communicate with one another. Then one of the band members told her he couldn't believe how they were having to talk to one another compared to in the studio.

Mostly, though, this "concert event" will still feel like a rock show. The "reapers" that dominate the set – rusted and old light fixtures, tangled in thick, black wires – blend seamlessly with the amps, strobe lights and projection screens. And rehearsals weren't that different from sound checks, at least during the inevitable downtime, when different members of the band would reflexively switch into musical self-amusement.

During one tech rehearsal, six days before the first preview performance started, Marquis killed time vamping the opening of Fleetwood Mac's "Rhiannon." Van Pelt thwacked out a few familiar bass line bars of songs by Rush and Heart, then committed fully to Dee-Lite's "Groove Is in the Heart." And the bass line to that song sounds similar to the classic opening bass line of the Animals' "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," so much so that Carbonell began singing it without even realizing what it was. By the time she asked, Earley and Van Pelt had joined in. Blitzen Trapper fans and theatergoers can always hope there's an encore.

Support Street Roots' outstanding vendors and great journalism.

Give a one-time or recurring donation today
streetroots.org

