



## Play It, They Will Come

The Baseball Project brings high heat to Sam Bond's

**L**eisurely, explosive, sun-drenched, history obsessed, epic, eccentric and full of odd rituals and larger-than-life characters, baseball by its very nature feeds on legend and myth — it's as much a metaphor as it is a sport, a game continually telling the story of itself. From movies like *Field of Dreams* and *Eight Men Out* to *Casey at the Bat* and Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*, our national pastime is rich in folklore and resounding with hymns to this very American way of life.

Veteran Northwest singer/songwriter Scott McCaughey, founder of the Young Fresh Fellows and all-purpose member of REM, is a baseball fan through and through. And as someone who understands the tragicomic poetry of the sport, McCaughey possesses the talent, wit

and chutzpa to turn what happens on the diamond into gems of pop rock.

McCaughey, who lives in Portland, told me over the phone last week that he'd always dreamed of writing baseball songs — maybe even an album's worth — but it wasn't until he started talking with former Dream Syndicate leader Steve Wynn that the idea really began to take shape. "It was just something a few years ago that Steve and I started jawing about in drunken conversation," he says. "Once we started to join forces, it had the chance of happening. I probably would have just put it off forever."

Add to this lineup REM guitarist Peter Buck on bass (Buck and McCaughey are also in the Minus 5) and drummer Linda Pitmon, and McCaughey's long-standing

dream became reality in the form of The Baseball Project, a superstar band of baseball fans that came to the fork in the road and took it.

*Volume 2: High and Inside*, the Project's follow-up to their 2008 debut *Frozen Ropes and Dying Quails*, is anything but a sophomore slump. In fact, it's more like what the late, great Seattle Mariner's announcer Dave Niehaus called "the Grand Salami," an out-of-the-park moonshot that hits for the cycle, with a tip of the hat to the peanut gallery.

Containing guest appearances by such rock luminaries as the Hold Steady's Craig Finn, Yo La Tengo's Ira Kaplan and Steve Berlin of Los Lobos, this rotation of knuckleball ballads, fastball anthems, sidearm slayers and jangle-pop change-ups is riotously funny, but it's no joke. "Somehow we tapped into a way to do it that seemed to work and not be too frivolous," McCaughey explains of the Project's process. "Of course, I made a career of being frivolous, and have nothing against that," he adds, laughing.

Most impressive is the balance the music finds among the disparate elements that comprise the complicated appeal of baseball and the love its loyal fans feel for the game. *High and Inside* runs the bases from the defiant and proud ("Please Don't Call Them Twinkies" and "Fair Weather Fans"), to the nostalgic and elegiac ("1976" and "Chin Music"), to songs of super-heroic absurdity ("Ichiro Goes to the Moon") and

rockers about the game's cult of personality ("The Straw That Stirs the Drink," which is what Reggie Jackson once dubbed himself). The centerpiece of the album, however, is McCaughey's bittersweet "Buckner's Bolero," a brilliant, hilarious and strangely touching speculative lament on what is arguably the most infamously botched play in the history of baseball, if not all sports; the song — which asks the question, "If one play killed the Sox, can you please tell me which?" — turns Bill Buckner's notorious blown grounder into a universal meditation on fate, circumstance and the wages of immortality.

Don't get me wrong: The Baseball Project isn't some minor league answer to Pink Floyd, all heavy and portentous and full of mock-wisdom. It's just a game, man, and it's only rock and roll. But you'll like it, because this is something special indeed. Athletic non-supporters, don't let the surface subject matter fool you; you didn't read *Moby Dick* to learn about the technique of 19th-century whaling, right? In the final tally, *High and Inside* is all about the music, and the talent and love and years of experience that make it zip and snap like a perfect slider. The Baseball Project is an indie-rock dream team of seasoned musicians who are having way more fun than any four people have a right to, and it shows. I'd give anything just to sit on the end of this team's bench, handing them their corked bats and bags of Big League chew. **EW**

**The Baseball Project plays at 9 pm Friday, April 8, at Sam Bond's; \$12**

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