

HORN BLOWERS

America's best and most difficult rock band plays Hi-Fi

Detroit's **Protomartyr** might be America's greatest rock band. They also might not be. Either way, Protomartyr vocalist Joe Casey says he doesn't really care.

"When we started this band," Casey tells me over the phone, "we had no illusions we were going to be in the back of limousines and playing arenas and things like that. The bands that we like were never the most popular things on Earth."

Protomartyr is touring the band's latest release, and first for Domino records, *Relatives in Descent*. The album is dense, fiercely intelligent post-punk for our time, offering deep rewards upon repeat listening.

In it, Casey's voice, at first a somewhat opaque, low and muttering baritone, shows surprising versatility. Sometimes it has the punched-in-the-nose quality of Joe Strummer, other times the art-punk sing/talk of The Fall's Mark E. Smith. And still other times he manages to be an artful gutter-crooner, slumped by his own thoughts and the weight of the world.

Against hot-shit, death-disco, punk-funk grooves, guitarist Greg Ahee balances deft, jazzy solos on "Here is The Thing" as well as caterwauling feedback on "Windsor Hum."

Over it all, Casey paints dystopian pictures with his words. Not a lot of bands (maybe none ever) have name-dropped Heraclitus the Obscure, as Casey does on album-



opener "A Private Understanding." And, throughout, his poetry is similarly dark, highly relevant and thoughtful. It's been a long time since a rock lyricist this unique has come along.

The abrupt change-up between the relatively mellow and gothic "Night-Blooming Cereus" to the straight-up punk pounder "Male Plague" is just enough rock 'n' roll nonsense to help deal with this crazy fucked-up world. From "Male Plague," Casey spits "Every boy wants to be a cop / male plague, male plague" and "Everybody know it's gonna kill you some day." You can't help but think of Vegas shooters.

In several instances on *Descent*, Casey repeats the phrase "horn blower." He says this comes from childhood anxieties but also our age of social media and shout-'em-down TV journalism.

"My fear of horns probably goes back to when I was a

kid," he recalls. "I really overreacted to the tornado sirens and the practice for nuclear war."

Casey says horns blowing are common in end-of-the-world stories from literature. "It seems like right now the loudest, most obnoxious people get the most attention," he says. "That seems to be the age that we're living in."

But *Descent* isn't all darkness. In fact, Casey calls himself a "struggling optimist," admitting to me he doesn't really know whether Protomartyr sends a particular message about the state of the world. If the band does, he says, "It might be pretty garbled."

But on album track "The Chuckler" Casey muses: "I guess I'll keep on chuckling / 'til there's no more breath in my lungs."

Protomartyr plays with Hurry Up and Palehound 10 pm Saturday, Oct. 14, at Hi-Fi Music Hall Lounge; \$12 advance, \$15 door.

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