

It's hard to put Alt-J in a box, or to define them and their music, but if you've ever heard any of their songs, you will know why I don't want to. The band, whose sound is often called indie rock, sprung from near oblivion to a rock hard fan base in India, especially since they announced that they were going to take Bangalore by storm this weekend. Contrary to gossip and speculation, they aren't really fascinated with keyboard shortcuts or with triangles, aren't trying to confuse you with their lyrics and *do* want to make good music. In keyboardist and backing vocalist Gus Unger's own words, "We're just simple guys from Leeds, who got to know each other, started a band and then muddled through it and magicked a Mercury award!" Take a look at what else he's revealing.

■ **First off — why Alt-J?!**

It's pronounced Alt-J because if you press alt + j on a Mac computer you get the symbol Δ. Unlike what many people think, we're not particularly obsessed with the shape. There's a line in *Tessellate*, "Triangles are my favourite shape," which we felt was a suitable line to say in the context of the song. The song was about how tessellations and triangles fit really well together. But, we only chose Alt-J because it was a name that we all agreed on. We were originally called FILMS, but there is an American band named The Films. We spent a month and a half trying to figure out a new name and we were really getting desperate! We didn't have to compromise on this one, we all liked it.

■ **Your lyrics are... interesting, to say the least! Tell us a little bit about how you get where you do with each song.**

Part of the reason [the album] is accessible is because we don't try to go out of the box or be innovative. We just try to play music that we like to hear and in the process, we absentmindedly sound like no other band at the moment. It's not something we're aware of, just something we're told. We work very hard, and in some cases we spend years on songs, trying to get them right. We keep on refining them, picking things out and changing things around. I think that because we were all friends before we were musicians, we naturally understand one another. We're on the same wavelength, which is why we end up sounding okay.

■ **Your songs are all so different. What do you think would be a good, all-rounded introduction to the band?**

Fitzpleasure!

■ **Your lyrics sometimes get flak for being nonsensical. Is there a reason why you're not up in arms defending them from the tags that they (unfairly) receive?**

We make the music that we love and do not feel the need to keep explaining ourselves. Our music belongs to whoever listens to it. Take it, and what you think of it, and make it your own. We are making it for people!

■ **You lost a band member (Gwil Sainsbury) in between albums. Was it hard to continue through that and are there any marked differences on the new album because of his departure?**

Well, yeah! It had a big impact on us. I didn't think we were going to pick ourselves up. But, with Gwil leaving, it sort of threw the door open for everyone to define what their role was in the band... *Hunger Of The Pines* is a classic example of that happening. There were certainly ideas for this album that were around before Gwil left. I think it's pretty fair to say this album was written as a trio



From the triangular delta symbol that characterises their name to their unique, sublime sound, Alt-J is definitely a band to watch. Rhea Dhanhoora talks to keyboardist Gus Unger to find out about the band that doesn't want to be defined

and he had some input on some of the songs.

■ **You're also not on one of those big, commercial labels — do you prefer that to the idea of moving to a bigger brand?**

We're not interested in trying to define ourselves. We don't like people trying to figure out what our music sounds like, nor do we feel like we do that for them. We're just happy writing our own music, and we're lucky enough to do it professionally. We're not into branding what we do. Being able to do what we like is the best position to be in and we do just that.

■ **Thom has been quoted as saying he's nearly 80% deaf — that's super inspiring. How does that contribute to the unique sound that he creates?**

He's nearly deaf. He's got very little hearing in either ear. That's why he's cocking his head when he's drumming. He's very talented and very determined and very

passionate about what he does. He is an important element to our group.

■ **When it comes to the new album — we're sure everyone's dying to know about the collaboration with Miley Cyrus....**

She's a fan of Alt-J. She used a snippet of *Fitzpleasure* in her live show, so I sent her a message on Twitter asking if she wanted a remix. She emailed me the stems to her song *4x4* and we noticed that one of her parts fit perfectly over a guitar riff that Joe [Newman — guitar/lead vocals] was playing. We just took it along from there.

■ **No one can really put you guys in a box and say, "Hey, that's the Alt-J genre"...**

People cannot define our sound and so, we play with their uncertainties. We simply make music that we like to make. We have never set out to be a certain kind of band. Naturally, we all brought different musical influences to the table and that means that our songs go in lots of different directions.

We've never had a musical manifesto about what sort of band we should be. That gives us a lot of freedom. I've never been able to figure it out. Some of the influences are quite folky, I suppose, but we wouldn't label ourselves as that. I'm not too worried about being able to label it and I think if people hear it, they'll hear it. I've never been able to describe it. I think that's a good thing. I think that we don't have a particular genre; I think that's the best way to be as a band.

■ **What's in store for your fans at the EMERGE festival this weekend?**

We are very excited to perform at the EMERGE festival. We have been looking forward to coming to India. We've heard so much about the country and cannot wait to explore what it has to offer. Our Indian audiences can expect nothing less than a good time. We have no special set for India, but I'm sure that we won't let our fans down. Hopefully they will respond well!