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IN CONCERT: Artful, Catchy Plug-Ins - Electro-collaboration Capital Cities makes its local DEBUT Saturday at SOhO

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent
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IN CONCERT

Capital Cities

When:

9:30 p.m. Sat.

Where: SOhO, 1221 State St.

Cost: \$15

Information: 962-7776, clubmercy.com

There is a quirky "don't touch that dial" moment in the middle of the "In a Tidal Wave of Mystery," the debut album by the indie electro-pop band Capital Cities, in which we suddenly hear the warm-yet-officious voice of NPR's Frank Tavares booming over the track of "Farrah Fawcett's Hair." Don't touch that dial, and don't leap to assumptions: As it happens, that pop-arty track is a left turn for a band already being groomed for stardom by the power of its hit single "Safe and Sound," heard as radio play and also in TV advertising spots. Warhol would be impressed.

As seen in goofy jumbo shades in promo materials, Ryan Merchant and Sebu Simonian, the duo at the center of the group, have a broad range of cultural reference points and interests, having formed as a jingle-writing partnership two years ago. Now, with the release of their debut album — on Capitol Records, no less — prospects for actual success as a recording/touring act are upon them. A current tour brings them to SOhO on Saturday for a local debut.

Mr. Merchant recently discussed the act's meteoric rise in progress.

NP: With your instrumentation and digital means, is the live presentation a balancing act of live and digital elements, and is that a blend in flux?

Ryan Merchant: Our live show is very much a mix of the live and electronic elements you hear in our recordings. We play with a bassist, guitarist and trumpeter, but also have multiple laptops. It's important to us to retain that live element that engages people when they come to a show.

NP: "In a Tidal Wave of Mystery" is a wonderful album. How did the process of making this go? Did you go into the project with a concept in mind, or was it more of an evolutionary process?

RM: Thank you. The songs from our debut album were written over the past two years. The process was hard at times, but mostly exciting; especially the moments when we stumbled upon what felt like a unique melody or lyric.

There was no concept for the album. The only goal was to create a collection of songs that each had their own distinct personality; each song tells a unique story that is in some way a manifestation of our collective thoughts considering we write as a team. We didn't want it to sound like the same song over and over.

NP: Your single "Safe and Sound" is really a punchy, infectious tune, which successfully gets into one's head and stays there. Did you envision that this would be the single that fueled whatever came after, or has its success taken you by surprise?

RM: We knew "Safe and Sound" was special from the moment we wrote it, but never could have predicted how big the song would become. We produced almost nine different versions before arriving at the current production. It was one of those tunes that we knew we had to get right because it had so much potential. Adding the trumpet on the current version was probably one of the best decisions we could have made.

NP: Even the title grabs at you with "Farrah Fawcett Hair," along with the musical goods, and the off-the-wall NPR snippets. It's good (stuff)! Was that one of those songs that materialized out of the blue, or grew out of a stray idea? What is the story behind that one?

RM: It came out of the blue like most of our songs. We usually sit down and start riffing — melodically and lyrically — over a beat and chord progression until we stumble across an idea that feels fresh. In this case, we lyrically decided to pay homage to all the things that are "undeniably good" in life, like Farrah Fawcett's hair.

Our list of "undeniably good" things included some silly items like Nutella and "Back to The Future 2" which informed the production of the song. We knew we could take it to an experimental place by adding voiceover from the NPR guy, a huge female gospel voice on the chorus, a verse by Andre 3000 and snippets of audio sent in from our fans. It was one of the most challenging songs to work on, but also the most fun because there were no rules.

NP: Can you give me a brief history of time in this band? How did it come together, and was there a kind of musical identity you were going after from the outset?

RM: Sebu and I met on Craigslist in 2008. I responded to an ad he put out offering his production services. Soon after, we began composing for TV commercials together and then started Capital Cities in 2010, hoping to exploit the great material we had been writing together over the years.

Early on we knew that we wanted to write music that was really fun to perform. Producing our songs in a dance style seemed to help achieve this goal. Plus we love dance music.

NP: Did you have particular role models or artists you emulated in the beginning?

RM: We have tons of influences: Pink Floyd, Air, Stevie Wonder, Daft Punk, Underworld, Joni Mitchell, Jeff Buckley, Radiohead, The Spice Girls, etc.

NP: Electro-pop, or whatever name suits the new synth-driven indie music, has really gained a foothold in the scene in the last few years. Do you have a theory about why that is? Is it partly a reaction to the dominance of guitar/bass/live drums-based pop, and maybe also a recognition of the ubiquity of technology in the modern moment?

RM: I think electronic music has gotten so popular because it is one of the easier styles of music to make; it's much easier to produce an album using software synths and samples than it is to go in a studio and record a bunch of live instruments. As a result of the lower barrier to entry, you have a lot more bands gravitating towards electronica, making the electronic sound more ubiquitous.

That said, it is still really hard to write a good song and produce it well even if you are using heavy electronic elements. Anyone can mess around with a sample, but only Daft Punk can take a forgotten sample and turn it into something timeless, modern and catchy as hell. They would be writing Motown hits in the '60s if they were born in that generation.

NP: Do you feel a kind of solidarity with other electro acts making the rounds now? Is there a sense of your belonging to a larger body of like-minded artists? And who, among those, are you a fan of?

RM: I think the camaraderie we feel with bands comes more from admiring their songwriting ability rather than the fact that they are an electronica act. Recently we've played shows with Fitz and The Tantrums and Awolnation, two bands that could not be more different from each other, and us, yet we feel a connection with them because they clearly care about songwriting.

NP: You're just in the early stages of your career as a group now, but are you happy with the way things are going at this point?

RM: We could not be happier. Our dreams are coming true right now.