

ARTS

Could Toronto's Zeus be the next great Canadian band?



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Toronto rock band Zeus

Michelle Siu for National Post

At a sound check at Toronto's Horseshoe Tavern, with beers on their amplifiers, Zeus rips through their new album, *Busting Visions*. They switch instruments, obsess over sound levels and noodle incessantly across the past six decades of popular tunes. Zeus have been touted by Broken Social Scene's Jason Collett as the next great Canadian rock band and now they're headlining Friday night's marquee event at the end of Canadian Music Week. For the four musicians from small town Ontario, the group may finally be arriving at a sound they've been working toward since they were kids.

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"I woke up the other day and something felt different. I can feel it, potential, and it makes for some nervous energy," says Neil Quin, 26, one of three members of Zeus who writes songs, plays bass and guitar and also sings.

"We've definitely put in our time and rose up through the ranks," adds Mike O'Brien, 31, who fell in with his bandmates when Afie Jurvanen, who records as Bahamas, left their group to play stadiums with Feist.

Will Zeus ever play larger arena-like venues, like throwback rockers The Black Keys?

"If the god's are willing," says Carlin Nicholson, 31, smiling. "We're going to need all the gods willing at once."

Zeus released their first album, *Say Us*, in 2010 and found themselves not only nominated for the Polaris Prize, but winning XM The Verge's award for album of the year. They spent two years on the road and opened a studio on Toronto's east side, where they continued to hone their three-part harmonies and work on their retro-leaning, early-Stones sound.

"People are excited to see a group with that kind of power who's not onstage with a laptop, doing what's supposed to be done," says Kevin Drew, the Broken Social Scene singer who puts Zeus out on his label, Arts & Crafts. "Sometimes you forget to rock out and it takes a group like Zeus to remind you what's real."

The day after Zeus closes the Horseshoe, they play a gig at Sonic Boom, the downtown record store immortalized in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*. It's raining outside and the guys are tired — Toronto moves last call to 4 a.m. during CMW — but again they tear through the complex arrangements of *Busting Visions* like a Rottweiler let loose from its cage.

"The musicianship comes in handy because you don't have to think about playing and you can let it go onstage and play with adrenaline," Nicholson says.

"We're a better band now because as musicians we've all matured."

Influences on *Busting Visions* include Little Richard and Michael Jackson, and if the band used to sound like The Beatles, the new record has them moving toward Queen. "Music junkies doesn't begin to express what these guys are like," Juno Award-winning rocker Sam Roberts says. "They're annoying to tour with because they're always showing up all the holes in your own capabilities." Next month, Zeus leaves to tour Europe with Dan Mangan and then returns to Canada on May 22 to plays shows from British Columbia through Saskatchewan to Ontario. From there, the band hits summer festivals, including the Ottawa Jazz Fest, Hillside and Osheaga, with other offers still being confirmed. The guys say that, as musicians, they feel like they're peaking, and while their sound may be coming back in vogue thanks to The Sheepdogs and, to some degree, Adele, they're happiest about how their relationship has evolved as friends.

"I grew up with three older brothers and I never imagined that I'd go through that again," Quin says. "I'm going through that again."

"In terms of popularity and stuff, this country will keep you humble," O'Brien says. "You get to a point where people in your home town are aware of you and then you go to the next town and get your ass kicked again."

Busting Visions by Zeus is out March 26 on Arts & Crafts records. For tour dates, visit arts-crafts.ca/zeus.

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