



## Bleach Blonde Dudes

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### *Prismo Beach Tape*

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(Self-released)

Bleach Blonde Dudes are four male humans who make and play music together in Portland, Oregon. I know these people personally, and so writing about their debut EP, *Prismo Beach Tape*, is a matter of finally accepting that all authority I must feign in order to leave the house each morning and tell the bus driver that I'm a music critic is, inevitably, a straw man I set up between the person I am who creates and the person I am who consumes.

Yet, like any saturated music scene, Portland's is one of underrepresented genres (representative of **totally underrepresented communities**), incestuous collaboration, and shameless self-promotion, but also: insane talent, an unbridled DIY-ethos, and a regional chauvinism that actually adds value, distinguishing it from other new-music enclaves like

Brooklyn or Austin, because Portland is viciously defensive of what it deems worthwhile in its community, which is often homegrown and home-nurtured apart from a national stage—this, in direct contrast to the aforementioned loci, which feel like black holes for nomadic bands seeking someone, anyone, to pay attention. Which to me means that the music I like is created by people I also like, and that if I wanted to erect illusory barriers in order to guarantee that my critical voice stay unclouded, I'd probably be a hermit. It also means that everyone kind of sounds like everyone else.

Except here are the Dudes, who sound more like themselves than anything, more like Everything at once instead of Everyone for a short period of time. In 2014 they finally self-recorded and self-released their debut, for free (except if you want to buy an actual cassette tape). The record went largely unnoticed, because these four male humans largely stayed away from drumming up notice, and while pieces of me genuinely wonder if loving these five songs should be chocked up to knowing the band so well—having experienced each of these songs, step-by-step, from conception to draft to performing to recording—I would much rather tell the story of my love for these five songs, however trivial, as an act of embracing the idea that such closeness, such intimacy, with any kind of music isn't born, D'Angelo-ready, to be declared classic upon two or three listens, but stems from countless experiences, from interactions with people we love, watching people we love open themselves up to whatever it is that allows them to express veiled urges, or pain, or joy, or whatever.

Which is why this year Cokemachineglow is demonstrating our love in a way not just different from most sites of our kind, but different from every other year we've summarized: what began with removing numerical ratings, and then followed into truncating our list to 30 for 2013, has culminated in a simple celebration—a spirit party where we finally stop pretending that we're some bastion of critical authority, and just admit that we're a group of friends and/or colleagues who find communicating our experiences with art through writing is a deeply personal blood-letting, a method by which we can hopefully translate those experiences in ways that others can share in the same transcendent participation. Because what's a piece of art if it's never shared? What's an opinion if no one ever hears it?

Only two of the Bleach Blonde Dudes are actually blonde, one being particularly ginger-y as opposed to Aryan-colored, which will prove in the ensuing years to be a social bane to his progeny, of which he recently had one, who, while adorable, is more translucent than not. There's Jon Timm, lead singer and lanky fella who sits behind a keyboard; Phil Nelson, lead guitarist, aforementioned ginger, and the once-named most beautiful person in the band, or so said his wife, who offered this assessment reluctantly; Ethan Pierce, swarthy bassist, swarthier perfectionist, and the Dude who wrote the band's eponymous song; and Bryan, drummer and consummate multi-instrumentalist, whose last name I didn't really know until about six months or so ago, which makes sense given how Bryan has probably never said

his last name out loud, potentially to anyone, in public, and also given how he emanates an aura of complete awe-inspiring aloofness. I think on Facebook Ethan's tagged Bryan as "Handy Crab," "Handi Crab," and "handy crab." I don't know what any of this means.

At one BBD show earlier in 2014, for example, Bryan stripped to his underwear behind the drumkit, despite it being against most health laws and standards, and probably didn't put pants back on until he woke up the next morning at home...or wherever it was he woke up. After playing their set, Bryan stalked into the street, still nominally clothed, to get some air and converse with showgoers. If anyone was discomfited by his nudity, no one dared say a thing to him; they just probably watched him disappear, skin touched by a thin shroud of dew as he ran off into the night.

"There goes Bryan," they sigh together, leaning heads upon shoulders and clasping hands around forearms. "Goodnight, sweet angel." Somewhere, miles in the distance, lost in the mist, a foghorn issues a long, forlorn bellow, much like a moose mourning its dead child.

"Wait, isn't that his van right there?...Where does he even keep his keys?"

Bleach Blonde Dudes started with a song called "Bleach Blonde Dudes," which was written by Ethan for 2012's RPM Challenge, an annual event wherein musicians take the month of February to record a full album (10 songs) or 35 minutes of music. At the beginning of March that year, I volunteered to host a listening party at my house. As planned, we all sat around the stereo system in respectful silence to give each RPM project its due, accompanied, upon the creator's choice, by a muted screening of whatever movie they wanted from my limited collection.

My Werner Herzog DVD collection was a popular choice; the first time any of us heard "Bleach Blonde Dudes" was in tandem with *Fata Morgana*, and people mostly argued about whether or not Herzog was actually filming mirages, and not the things the mirages were "reflecting," which was pretty funny, because he was. Filming mirages that is. Not that Herzog doesn't have a track record for manipulating the "reality" of his documentaries, but the whole point of the film was to meditate upon the surreality of mirages, and not whether or not they actually are mirages, so it was sort of like debating keeping fluoride out of Portland's water supply solely on the basis of "that money going somewhere actually useful, like to art programs or hiring more teachers" or whatever, as if municipal funding is as easy to toss around as a frisbee in the parking lot of a Phish show, meaning that the debate isn't about where the money should go, it's about the fucking fluoride itself. Which, after a vote in 2013, didn't go into Portland's water supply anyway, so, anti-fluoride factions, since you raised something like \$800,000 to keep fluoride out, in the ensuing year has that money gone toward hiring new teachers or buying some new paint brushes or anything that actually fucking matters? I hope that you've started to pay kids' dental bills.

The time came for Jon Timm to play us what he'd come up with during February, and as is typical of Jon Timm's whole life steez, he prepared a music video to go along with his 35-minute "Spirit Party," a song that is now the centerpiece, in severely truncated form, of *Prismo Beach Tape*. The track is, like all of Bleach Blonde Dude's music, an indie pop song hung from its Achilles tendon to bleed dry. It's a grotesquerie at times, a still squirming earworm tacked to a dissection tray in a high school science lab, the internal parts labeled with little tropical drink umbrellas topping toothpicks. "Spirit Party"'s most notable organ is its heavy bass line, which gives form to its wandering sections—first Jon Timm's creepy stanzas punctuated by fuzzy soundbytes probably from '80s horror films, then Phil's complicated guitar solo forever unwinding, then more soundbytes and more bass and more of Jon Timm's lyrics, unsettling, like they've been pilfered from a half-remembered version of *Peter Pan* spliced with the script to *Beetlejuice*. The songs that surround it on the tape, from "Serpent" to "Zebra," from lovely harmonies to hellish noise, harpsichord arias to butt-rock salvos, are each carefully built edifices balanced on the head of those umbrella-topped toothpicks, radio-familiar pop ditties living moment by moment through sheer force of will. There is disaster at their fringes, danger in their bones; this is the stuff of awkward first dates that give way to transformative night terrors.

But, back in 2012, the music video for "Spirit Party" was an eviscerated collage of reused VHS splendor, meaning that Jon Timm probably found its source at "the bins," tucked snugly into deep SE Portland, which is Goodwill's elephants' graveyard of odds and ends yet to find a home at one of their many outlets. I've never been to the bins, because I have deep-seated fears of sticking my hands into things that might give me hepatitis.

The visual accompaniment to "Spirit Party" began as a poorly shot karaoke performance of a pretty young woman in—if I remember correctly, which I probably don't—a flight attendant's outfit singing something that wasn't "Spirit Party." We guessed it was German, because its unsettling jambalaya of childish whimsy and Old World conservatism, dusted with a whisper of Grimm-like fancy, seemed like something the Germans would do.

That is, until the woman began to take off her shirt, and then her bra. Liberated from the strictures of underwear, she danced all the more vigorously. Jon Timm edited this into a series of pixelated and sea-sick loops—her shirt comes off, then her bra, her breasts swing free, she raises her arms to sing the chorus, she jumps, and then she turns and her clothes return to her so she can remove them once more—developing motifs to support and represent sections of his rather long song suite. Nervous laughs covered up uncomfortable shifting. Everyone in the room hoped it would go no further.

It did. A young man enters the frame and feigns interest in singing with the young woman, though we knew instantly what he was there to do. People began to ask Jon Timm what was going to happen next, which was a veiled way of asking, "Are we actually going to watch this?"

Yes, we are, and we did. The young woman spends a large portion of the Party blowing the young man, and really: that guy looked too young to be doing what he was doing. But those are Germans for you.

It's hard (heh) to describe the tenor in the room. No one got up and stormed out, sensibilities offended—not that anyone should have, because it was, if anything, a really funny thing Jon Timm was doing—but no one questioned Jon Timm as to why he was doing what he was doing. And even Jon Timm didn't seem to totally make the connection between what he had created and what the effect would be on a group of people focused solely on the TV, together, in the dark.

It wasn't a traumatizing experience or anything, watching Jon Timm's cool-ass weirdo porn-thing with ten other friends in the dark while no one said a word, and it was somewhat endearing, really, that Jon Timm never asked us if we even wanted to watch this thing, mostly because that kind of willing disconnect—between shock and shame, between value and obscenity and controversy—is so rarely experienced, really only glimpsed in the occasional fearlessness of a Jon Timm, or in the sweaty underwear of a Handy Crab as his butt disappears over the next hill.

Yet: not everyone will want to watch whatever it was Jon Timm was doing. Some people may find it offensive...and if not offensive, then maybe just uncomfortable. I hope that wasn't the case. The sad byproduct of being an artist—someone who creates something that resonates with people in ways they have yet to experience—is that one must sublimate all the self-sustaining urges one experiences when confronted by uncomfortableness. In other words, if you feel really fucking awkward when watching porn with your friends, then you probably shouldn't watch porn with your friends. Perhaps your body is conveying to you the direness of your actions: here is an event that shouldn't belong in your head.

Not that it shouldn't exist, or that Jon Timm shouldn't have followed his muse down the rabbit hole; I have the same feelings about Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò*, which to this day I still question as something I should have watched. I respect the film in and of itself, and I admire Pasolini as an artist with guts, but: should those things be in my head? They'll always be there. I see them now: a naked pubescent, scooping shit off the floor, bringing it to her mouth.

In Portland, where the Bleach Blonde Dudes live, the music scene, and by extension the art scene, is one of talented folks avoiding being seen as prudes. Everyone is game for everything; this is the modus operandi of a young, progressive, artistic community. And not because of the value of the thing itself, but because of how that game-ness looks when paired with that thing. Take Ron Jeremy's *Club Sesso*. Maybe you feel really, really uncomfortable being naked in front of other people, let alone having sex in front of other people, let alone with lots of other people. It's not a moral judgment; it's just your body telling

you something important. It doesn't make you a prude, but unless you go around explaining to everyone that you're not, the intentions and the deeds (or the refraining from that deed) get all lumped together.

Sometimes I ask myself if the Bleach Blonde Dudes will ever be popular in Portland. They're more than talented enough, more talented, in fact, and technically adept than most popular musicians I know here. But they do nothing to de-prude themselves: they make the best music they can together, and they enjoy that process. They have fun playing; they take chances. Ethan sometimes screams at Phil mid-song: "You're doing really good!" Which is such an un-cool thing to yell at someone. There's no mystery to them, no posturing, no networking beyond whom they happen to know. Which is why I feel so beholden to spreading the word about this music, this EP, this passed-over gem amidst a simultaneously loving and indifferent scene. There is that existential disconnect in the very DNA of their band, that networking and the rigmarole of Portland promotion makes them uncomfortable, and so they don't do it, and they maybe don't really see why they should. Because then they'd feel uncomfortable. So others have to, others who imbibe shame as a necessary evil, who endure hype as the only mechanism by which hobbies become careers, by which passion paves way to pay. I accept that this is who I am. But that doesn't mean I can't be more than that.

Dom Sinacola