

NO AGE

The expansive hall of the Ukrainian Culture Center of Los Angeles echoes with the scraping of folding chairs being dragged across the wooden floor. Skinny-legged girls with razor-blade haircuts noisily tear off strips of duct tape and affix posters decorated with Magic Markers to the walls. An unshaven man moves past a sign emblazoned “VEGAN,” in primary colors, and unloads his palette of orange-tipped Sparks cans onto the bar.

Then, the unmistakable tones of a sound check cut through the air. The bass drum kicks sporadically and the drummer brushes the mop of black hair from his eyes, before leaning forward to utter, “Check one, two,” into the microphone. The flannel-clad guitar player saunters onstage, carrying his own amp, then straps on his guitar and aimlessly strikes a chord that pierces the white-noise hum of the amplifiers. In a few hours, the crowd will teem with the ingenuity and depravity of a revitalized Los Angeles youth culture, relishing in a cut-and-paste aesthetic and DIY ethic, as the sonic froth of No Age pulsates throughout the hall.

The space fills with the warmth of carefully orchestrated noise pouring from Randy Randall’s grimy guitar layers and Dean Spunt’s thump-thump drums. The Ukrainian Culture Center is at a confluence of Los Angeles’s old-guard zine punks and the new school’s viral, video generation of digipunks. But No Age is old school.

“Black Flag once played on this stage,” coos Randall, between songs, to the shaggy audience who doesn’t pogo, but instead sways limp-armed and off-beat to his Brian Eno-tinged tidal waves of sound. For these followers of the cult of No Age, the buzz has swelled explosively in the last year. In 2007, the freaked-out, dirt-rock duo released five vinyl EPs on five separate labels. These songs were then included on *Weirdo Rippers*, the band’s FatCat Records debut and critically lauded full-length album. No Age’s newest album, *Nouns*, was released by Sub Pop, the widely successful label that virtually created the now co-opted indie milieu. Oh, and it also birthed a little band called Nirvana. And like that Seattle band, No Age has been lavished with the adulation of being “new punk,” an as-of-yet-unnamed hybrid that vacillates between Kevin Shields-like, whale-humping guitar groans and mutilated Pixies jangle-pop structure. “Noise now is what hardcore was in the eighties,” Randall says. “It’s this way to rebel against any sort of structure, or authority, in music.”

“Noise is the next honest frontier,” Spunt quietly elaborates.

The duo’s exploration of the fringe came about in the crucible of The Smell, an anything-goes, all-ages venue hiding in a former Mexican grocery in Downtown Los Angeles. Both Spunt and Randall grew up in the outer crescent of Los Angeles County—Santa Clarita and Walnut—and made frequent journeys into this concrete heart of urban sprawl. “There was a lot of activity here, instead of my hometown, where nothing was ever going on,” Randall says. “The Smell is where we got to experiment and find what kind of band we wanted to be. It pushed the boundaries of whatever ideas we had about music—and we had a community to try out these new ideas.”

While on tour, the duo often tries to recreate the community feeling of The Smell by playing unconventional venues, like libraries, the L.A. River, and the Ukrainian Culture Center—places that illuminate the hidden treasures of a city, spaces that typically go unnoticed. For these homegrown shows, they keep their feet grounded in lo-fi and DIY, designing their own merchandise, providing vegan snacks (supporting a lifestyle to which they both subscribe), and creating their own art. As attested by their minimalist two-piece band, the guys like to keep it simple. “We are just doing the same thing,” Spunt says. “We’re still just making music, making shirts, all the same shit.”

“But at some point,” continues Randall, finishing Spunt’s thought, “you’re just a band, too. You have to stay grounded and realize, we just gotta play some songs. It doesn’t matter who we are.” Whether or not they admit it, things are different from back in the day at The Smell. As the sound check concludes, a photographer brings Randall and Spunt out to the street for a photo shoot. Randall carries his guitar and chats with passers-by, as the photographer clicks an external light meter, then snaps the shutter of a vintage Nikon. Spunt walks with his head down, one arm cradling the other.

A drunken girl stumbles by, and asks, “Are you Steve?” while her friend holds onto her arm, stabilizing her. Soon, it becomes evident that she may not be drunk, just British. “He’s going to get us into this show, Steve will,” she says, pointing at Spunt, and revealing that she is actually drunk *and* British.

“Sorry, we don’t know him, but I hope you can get in,” Randall says, and crosses the street, guitar in hand, to visit fans and friends eating pre-show cones at Scoops ice-cream parlor. ☒

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