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One Ring Zero weaves writers' words into song

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New York is notorious for squashing the ambitions of young literary talents as bluntly as an Oxford English Dictionary flattens houseflies. Yet three years after moving there from Richmond, Va., Michael Hearst and Joshua Camp have stitched themselves tightly into its literary scene, collaborating and socializing with the likes of Jonathan Lethem, Margaret Atwood, Myla Goldberg, and Paul Auster.

"Paul? He's like a father figure," says Hearst, seated in an East Village cafe. "I was over at his house right before here, actually — just to say hi."

What's most astounding, though, is how Hearst and Camp have managed this lightning-fast ascent: by being musicians. Their rock duo, One Ring Zero, released "As Smart As We Are" this summer, and each song's lyrics were commissioned from a different prominent author. Brooklyn-based Soft Skull Press "published" the album, accompanied by a beautifully designed hardcover chapbook of the lyrics. (The group comes to the Middle East Upstairs on Thursday.)

Writer-musician collaboration is nothing new. Salman Rushdie penned lyrics for U2, Bjork incorporated e.e. cummings poems into her songs, and both "The Ice Storm" author Rick Moody and "Jesus' Son" author Denis Johnson, two of the guest lyricists on "As Smart As We Are," have written for singer Jim Roll.

But "As Smart As We Are" embodies a deeper, more idiosyncratic confluence of the two art forms, blurring the lines between rock music and literature so compellingly that some observers have tagged it with a curious label: lit rock. Now, as One Ring Zero's crowds get bigger, Hearst notices the proportion of people in horn-rimmed glasses also increasing. "I never imagined that we'd move to New York and get an audience by playing literary events," he says.

Little about Hearst, 31, and Camp, 33, fits the stereotypical

rock 'n' roll mold either. Both men hold degrees in music composition. Hearst's youthful good looks — the eager eyes behind his glasses — are more spelling-bee-participant than Warped tour headliner.

Their sound is more unconventional still — an improbably poppy hodgepodge of counterpoint and cacophony, part They Might Be Giants, part Kurt Weill. The album is filled with obscure instruments the duo discovered while working as repairmen at a Hohner (the musical instrument manufacturer) factory — namely the clavola, a briefly manufactured, circus-sounding cousin of the accordion. The duo's audible fervor for these unconventional instruments meshes well with several of the writers' offbeat styles. In "All About Houseplants," novelist Amy Fusselman muses on fauna in heat. Daniel Handler, a member of the rock band the Magnetic Fields but better known as children's author Lemony Snicket, contributes "Radio." It's a love song, sort of, that pines, "If I had a radio for every time you loved me so/ I wouldn't have a radio at all."

Lethem, author of the novels "Motherless Brooklyn" and "The Fortress of Solitude," offers "Water," a song written, quite thoughtfully, from the perspective of cockroaches.

"Jonathan Lethem's piece is funny and weird in a way [that] he is — and wry," says contributor A.M. Homes. Homes, author of the acclaimed short story collection "The Safety of Objects," feels many of the songs bear their author's mark, stylistically or thematically. Her lyrics for "Snow" — a tender account of a little girl's tea party with her mother — share her fiction's fascination with surreal childhood memories.

As classically trained composers, Camp and Hearst tailored their music to the spirit of each lyric. "We have to service the words," Camp says. Thus they gave Myla Goldberg's "Golem" the klezmer harmonies it begged for. Denis Johnson's incontrovertibly country-leaning "Blessing" the album's most compelling lyric, re-



PHOTO/CHRIS SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY

Michael Hearst (left) and Joshua Camp of One Ring Zero. The rock duo's new disc features the lyrics of prominent authors.

ceived acoustic guitar and twang.

Hearst claims the difficulty of setting these 17 lyricists — most of whom had no experience as such — to music never daunted the duo. He even egged on a few writers who initially balked out of insecurity. After all, One Ring Zero was founded as a more artistically adventurous and challenging antidote to its members' previous, conventional garage bands.

"We basically weren't using our music education," jokes Camp. "We can write all genres, man. Just give it to us."

Go to www.boston.com/ae/music to hear clips from "As Smart As We Are."

"They will literally play anything with me, and at a moment's notice," says Moody. He frequently invites the duo to improvise behind him at readings, a pairing that has birthed its own CD, "Rick Moody and One Ring Zero."

The band's entree to the literary scene came when Hearst visited Store, an outpost of curiosities in Brooklyn run by the eccentric but influential publishing company McSweeney's. The demo CD Hearst left found its way to Dave Eggers, McSweeney's founder and author of "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius."

Soon, One Ring Zero became McSweeney's house band of sorts, performing at frequent readings and events. The duo quickly charmed a clutch of renowned writers such as Moody and Homes — folks Camp and Hearst often

knew absolutely nothing about.

The duo, who had worked with playwrights and choreographers, put out feelers for an "author project." Hearst says, "Rick introduced us to Jonathan Lethem, Jonathan Lethem introduced us to Margaret Atwood — a lot of it worked that way." Others, like Auster, who wrote "The New York Trilogy," were reached with the same chutzpah that wooed Eggers. No money, ever changed hands.

"Writers are such an isolated bunch of people that they are very willing and ready to adopt anybody," says Homes. "We're all sort of disgruntled rock stars anyway."

The duo was refused only once — by Michael Chabon, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay." Hearst has since set his declining e-mail to music.

Now, with the release of "Rick Moody and One Ring Zero," another project underway with Auster, and a recent appearance on NPR's "Fresh Air," Hearst and Camp have not only embraced their "lit rock" reputation but seem primed to become the movement's indisputable kings. Never mind that neither knows exactly what "lit rock" means. Presumably, it's a genre in which bookishness supplants cool, and sincerity trumps swagger.

"I wear it like a badge," says Hearst. "I've been amazed by how open the literary world has been. I never felt quite so welcomed by the music community. I mean, when I have a kidney stone, I e-mail Rick [Moody] and ask, 'What do I do?'"