

FROM ESI WORDFEST

"I didn't think it would actually happen — she's on a different level," says Hearst. "But, out of the blue, I got an e-mail from Margaret Atwood, saying 'Jonathan Lethem told me about your project. It sounds fantastic.' Three days later, she sent me the lyrics to Frankenstein Monster Song."

As *Smart As We Are*, like their other four albums to date, was recorded in their basement studio on a seven-track tape machine (it used to be an eight-track, but one track is broken). The basement itself, says Hearst, "is a nightmare in many senses; you can't even stand up in it. It has 5-foot-high ceilings and pipes hanging down. Everybody came down to the basement and hunched over. Having Paul Auster down there — he's like six-foot-something-or-other — was like the seventh-and-a-half floor from *Being John Malkovich*."

As *Smart As We Are* provides an unusual chance to peek into rarely seen corners of these authors' minds. "Certainly we're not the first to take authors' lyrics and put them to music," says Hearst, "but I don't think it's been done to this extent."

Having such a diversity of prose writers allows for interesting comparisons. A number of them seem to have used the project as an excuse to let their hair down. Atwood's contribution, for example, is the lament of a lovelorn Frankenstein monster: "Sew me a lady, sew me a lady, sew me a monster lady just like me."

When the lyrics are goofy, the music brings to mind the nerd-rock of *They Might Be Giants*, as in Dave Eggers' *The Ghost of Rita Gonzalo* and Daniel Handler's *Radio*. Other writers have resisted the temptation to whimsy, such as Myla Goldberg, whose eerily resonant *Golem* is a standout track.

Sandman creator Neil Gaiman's haunting *On the Wall* brings to mind the poetry of the English Renaissance, with lyrics such as "I think/That I would rather recollect/A life misspent on fragile things/Than spent avoiding moral debt."

Of all the authors involved, Gaiman and Denis Johnson might be the best choices for having the most promising futures as songwriters, but *Tin Pan Alley* holds promise for Clay McLeod Chapman, whose campy, cabaret-flavoured *Half and Half* is the catchiest little number ever written from the point of view of a high-kicking hermaphrodite.

One Ring Zero, usually a sextet, will

appear at the Calgary folk festival as a three-piece band. Camp and Hearst will pull out the Tickle Trunk of claviolas, Theremins and the like. Their percussionist will play the cajon, essentially a big box. (Cajon is Spanish for "big box.")

Why has One Ring Zero been able to bridge the rarely travelled chasm between writers and musicians?

"Stereotypically, writers are huge intellectuals," Hearst says, "and musicians are the opposite, but..." he pauses, searching for an explanation. "You know," he says and laughs, "we're geeks."