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One Ring Zero

VCU Alumni rock the world of music

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Spectrum Writer

Good news for music lovers: two Richmonders have hit it big with what can arguably be called the most creative, insightful album of the year... and they're coming back to Richmond for three shows in mid-October.

It's hard to imagine that not too long ago, Michael Hearst and Joshua Camp of the duo One Ring Zero were both VCU music composition majors hanging around the local music scene, playing in local bands at places like Twisters (now Nancy Raygun) on Grace Street.

Hearst even remembers seeing Red Hot Chili Peppers play to an audience of 20 people at Shafer Court and skipping Choral Arts class to climb to the top of the Music Center bell tower overlooking the Academic Campus (no online Commons Ramcam then).

Now the two live in New York and tour the country to promote their anything but conventional album, "As Smart As We Are" that's been reviewed and critically acclaimed in media outlets all over the world including NPR's Fresh Air, the Village Voice, the New Yorker and Canada's Globe and Mail.

So how did they get here?

Hearst and Camp knew each other as students at VCU but became better acquainted while working at Hohner warehouse in Ashland, Virginia, where they mainly tuned and repaired harmonicas and accordions. They learned about many instruments that the average person doesn't get to see everyday including the Claviola, an accordion-like instrument that was discontinued almost immediately after it was introduced, and the Theremin, the electronic sci-fi instrument that creates sound by waving your hands near a couple antennas.

They both experimented with these and more conventional instruments, and their sessions led to the creation of One Ring Zero. Meanwhile, Hearst assembled a recording studio called Urban Geek Studios in Southside Richmond where he recorded and produced albums for numerous local groups.

In 2001, while recording some instrumental albums and playing for Clay McLeod Chapman's Pumpkin Pie Show, One Ring Zero landed the unusual position of "House Band" for McSweeney's Publishing in New York City, where they played in between readings at weekly literary events. This is how they met numerous writers, which inevitably led to their sensation "As Smart As We Are."

"As Smart As We Are" is a hybrid of music and literature that some critics dubbed as the term "lit-rock." Instead of writing lyrics themselves, Hearst and Camp use the

works of renowned writers such as Paul Auster, Margaret Atwood and Denis Johnson. In a form that Hearst calls "divorced collaboration," One Ring Zero would first ask the writers for lyrics, and then the two musicians would compose music to match the lyrics.

Because there is so much competition in the music industry today, Hearst sees their creative approach as a "back door" to get their music out.

The music itself is hard to describe in words.

Some of the based on an ropean Jewish called klezmer, tinkered with cultures all over the world.

Not only does One Ring Zero use unconventional instruments such as the Theremin and the Claviola but they also use effect pedals with conventional instruments to discover brand new sounds. Despite the experimentation, the songwriting is pretty much in pop format. Hearst said that it would be a lie if he said he wasn't into the whole pop thing.

The album is a ride more like an imported gypsy merry-go-round at a state fair to be precise: it's fun, mysterious and it takes you on this surreal voyage where you think you're heading into unknown places before you realize you're still right at home.

It's been called everything from Acid-klezmer to Circus-flea-cartoon music, but Hearst summed it up when he remarked, "It's music you hear in your dreams."

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Tour Dates

Oct. 11 at 8 p.m.
Barksdale Theater
Shops at Willow Lawn
Richmond, Va.
Advanced tickets, \$25

Oct. 12 at 7 p.m.
The Canal Club
1545 E. Cary St.
Richmond, Va.
Online tickets available at \$10

Oct. 13 at 7:30 p.m.
Chop Suey Books
1317 W. Cary St.
Richmond, Va.
Free

For more information visit
<http://www.oneringzero.com>



Dan Tytkowski