



Photo courtesy of Justin Pollak/Bugs in the Basement

Music without filters

Bugs in the Basement duo explores soundscapes

BY MICHAEL DASHIELL
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Talk about an underground music scene.

Long before the 2019 novel coronavirus pulled musicians off the stage and into home studios, Olympic Peninsula artists Germán Pina and Justin Pollak were creating sonic adventures with their unique Bugs In The Basement duo.

Blending an array of vintage and handmade instruments with modern synthesizers, Pina and Pollak explore the possibilities of music and soundscapes with a few kickers:

It's all performed live. It's all unedited.

It's anything but abbreviated; sessions are typically at least an hour long and some longer than 90 minutes.

And it's all exclusive to the basement — meaning, don't expect to see Bugs In The Basement on tour anytime soon.

Oh, and unless one purchases a digital copy of an album at bandcamp.com, it's all free.

"We both have jobs and families; our motivation is not for money or recognition," Pollak said. "We do it for the love of music."

Bugs In The Basement posts the hour-plus-long jam sessions online at the duo's website at bugsinthebasement.com, with additional content available on podcasts. The duo also films and edits short videos featuring their music, and

regularly post them on YouTube and Instagram.

The duo have a pair of albums, appropriately titled Bugs In The Basement Vol. 1 and Bugs In The Basement Vol. 2; the newest album, a selected sampling of their 2019 sessions, is curated by Scott Schaffer of Right Brain Records, a Port Angeles-based nonprofit label that "promotes exploration of uncharted musical territories."

The duo also films and edits short videos featuring their music, and regularly post them on Instagram.

As Right Brain Records' website (rightbrainrecords.com) notes, Bugs in the Basement produces recordings that "are improvisational soundscapes, excerpts of the vast potential of the human mind."

Origins

Pina and Pollak stated conducting these improvised jam sessions-turned-songs more than seven years ago. The idea, the duo said, was analyze what they were playing and, as Pollak puts it in an interview on soundcloud.com, "to see if there was magic there."

The two have a combined 50 years of musical experience. Pollak, a Carlsborg resident and peninsula native his whole life, said he'd spent years playing in bar bands, bluegrass and rock groups and the like.

"This particular thing I've been working on the last seven years ... it's fairly underground," Pollak said.

The two met in a small town way: their wives worked together



Duo Germán Pina and Justin Pollak record hour long-plus improvisational music under the Bugs in the Basement moniker. Submitted photo

for a time.

"When you live in a small town with a small music scene, word travels when people are looking to connect," Pollak said.

"We did not in any way set out to do what we are doing. Just little by little, week by week, we slowly let the creative process evolve without having any attachment to the outcome.

"After years of attempting to make our creative process more enjoyable and neither one of us having the ego driving us to push towards a conventional 'band' we looked back and realized that I guess this is what we do."

Pollak noted of the band's beginning, "There was quite a big jump from the early days of us just hanging out and recording and going home and listening. There was no construct. We didn't know if we were going to start a band or if we were going to play live or get other member or learn cover tunes. Nothing had been developed.

"As things evolved we slowly added gear and problem-solved and came up with new ways just ...

to make the recordings we made sound better."

The problem, Pollak noted, was that as their gear accumulated — instruments electronic and organic, plus endless lines of cables and connectors — their set-up became somewhat cumbersome. In addition to various electronic, acoustic and bass guitars, the pair has over the years added analog and digital synthesizers, a Hammond organ, a piano, harmonicas, a didgeridoo, flutes, xylophone, and a variety of percussive instruments, from an acoustic drum kit to cajons and djembes to home-made percussion, to the mix.

The duo has also accumulated an extensive amount of technical gear such as mixing consoles, midi controllers, computer software, effects pedals and more, the likes of which, Pollak said, is key to the Bugs' sound.

Songs have even included previously non-musical gear such as windshield wiper blades and PVC pipe.

"It became impossible for us to even consider going out and playing live," Pollak said.

Instead, Pina and Pollak turned to the web, posting songs on podcasts and youtube with essentially no limits to the length of their sonic explorations.

"We were locked into a closed environment and yet we still wanted to connect our art or music, whatever, with people," Pollak said.

The process

Each week in Pina's basement in the Port Angeles area gives the pair another opportunity to find new sonic paths. Each week they take a break from their day jobs —

Pollak is a woodworker who's been building custom cabinetry and fine woodworking in the area for the last 25 years; Pina is a paraeducator in the Port Angeles School District — to record for an hour, purposefully unscripted and unedited.

The pair initially find a sound and then loop it, then add another instrument or sound to the mix.

Any over-dubbing, Pina noted, is done live.

"(It) ends up being a journey; there's no duration expectations," said Pina, who moved from Argentina to Port Angeles in 2005.

"When you say a journey, that's the word. Imagine a train going from the East Coast to the West Coast. Things are going to be changing gradually and are not going to be abrupt."

Pollak noted, "Self-discovery is what being an artist is all about. If something's wrong that's how it goes. You have to live with the consequences of your actions. (It) applies the pressure ... and motivates."

None of the hour-plus-long songs they create, the pair note, are alike.

Peninsula towns like Sequim and Port Townsend and Port Angeles have strong but largely unseen art scenes, he said, creating "a lot of really unique art that's buried just underneath the surface."

"This sort of feels like one of those projects."

Check out more of Bugs In The Basement at www.bugsinthebasement.com.

For more about The Right Brain Records, a label that features artists based in the Pacific Northwest, other parts of North America and as far away as England, visit www.rightbrainrecords.com.

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