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By Kurt Gottschalk

Ten years in guerrilla performance group **Hairbone** commit their bad trip live shows to record

Storming The

Reality Asylum

Tim Schutsky

Hairbone: (from left) Raúl de Nieves, Jessie Stead, Nathan Whipple

The video for “DOA At The BOA”, one of two that Hairbone posted in September, opens with what by any measure would be called a pretty awful noise. Static, growls and groans, feedback and pitch-shifted howls fill the first 15 seconds as the soundtrack to what appears to be a police reality show from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

A busy signal intrudes and the scene switches to a skeleton in sneakers sitting on an enormous pink sofa and playing a very metal canary yellow guitar. The music shifts to something nearly soothing, the scene changes to a Latino officer behind the wheel of a New York police car, then shifts again to an emergency call centre.

The slow, electric guitar chimes that had just promised solace grow foreboding with repetition. The skeleton dials 911 on a banana and reports a dead body (presumably himself) at the Bank of America ATM. The video ends with the officer applying lipstick to his lips and planting a kiss on the ATM window. Not much happens by way of music or narrative, but it’s all somehow ominous, or ridiculous, or ridiculously ominous. You’re left with an uneasy feeling and a banal, three-note riff echoing in your ears.

The group’s drummer Jessie Stead made the polished-smooth video, filming at an actual Brooklyn ATM on Halloween so the skeleton costume wouldn’t attract undue attention. “It’s just kind of sampling the world for free,” she says. “If you’re used to not having a budget, you get very good at not having one.

“But I think we’d be very great at money,” she’s quick to add. “We can definitely also do that.”

The video does little, however, to prepare potential buyers of the band’s first album or to suggest what a live show might entail. The second video, for the anxiously dancy title track “Earth To Momma”, does even less. The album is a mix of manic chants, power drill guitar, synthetic beats and, occasionally, something somewhat songlike. But the live show is where they thrive, in as much as unhinged mania might be called thriving.

“We’ve been around for almost ten years – we’re kind of like a really live band,” confirms vocalist Raúl de Nieves. Sipping ‘experimental mead’ at the rooftop bar of Honey’s, a small vintner on the edges of the trendy Bushwick neighbourhood of New York where the band are playing their record release show, he is dressed in a tasteful blue frock with low-heeled mules and carrying a bright red clutch.

“Our shows are based around ideas,” he says, adding that the album has “given us a perspective of what we can do.

“We have this huge archive of the band,” he continues, “but there’s no control. This kind of gave us an idea of how we could control the band and highlight the talents.”

Control isn’t a word you’d expect to hear from a group who used an invitation to perform at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art to stage a gossipy meltdown of a laundrette scene which ended – after 20 or so minutes as their sets usually do – with the destruction of the rough cardboard stage set they’d constructed. But if there is an agent of control within the Hairbone organisation, it’s Stead. She exhibits a focus that helps them realise the wild scenes of de Nieves’s character rants.

Guitarist Nathan Whipple – the only one of the three with formal musical training – perches crosslegged on a bench during the rooftop interview, quiet and alert, listening intently to his bandmates with a faint grin. He only speaks up to encourage them to talk about their projects outside the band – de Nieves is working on a commission to build a carousel for the Bulgari jewelry company, Stead recently finished editing a documentary on Fluxus artist George Maciunas – or to observe that “musicians are the worst people to play music with”. For his part, Whipple has also had a book of drawings published and, according to his bandmates, is a formidable chess player. As soon as the interview is over, his attention turns back to his phone for Hurricane Florence updates.

Hairbone's roots lie in a duo of de Nieves and Whipple, with Stead documenting their performances and projecting video behind them. They had met when Whipple happened on de Nieves doing a street performance in Chelsea, New York's gallery district, where he hatched out of an egg, which prompted Whipple to invite him out for cheeseburgers. Eventually Stead became a part of the stage shows and they named themselves Haribo, after the German sweet company.

"There was something funny about the built-in branding," Stead says, "but I didn't want to put the record out with that name. We wanted to start a rumour that there was a cease and desist," she adds, suggesting that *The Wire* could help in perpetuating that story. The name change is a bit fuzzy, though. Sometimes they also go by Hairboner, or claim that they were never called Haribo, or that they're shapeshifters and their name changes with them.

De Nieves revisits his cop character for the show that night, completing the costume with fishnets and heels. While their performances can be funny, this one is unusually confrontational. De Nieves pushes through the audience, demanding names, screaming that "this isn't a jazz club" and smashing one of the few chairs in the room. Stead's slow-throb drums and Whipple's saturated guitar lines heighten the anxiety. Eventually, de Nieves breaks down, crying something about wanting to be a superhero, and then regains his composure.

"Did you ever wake up from a bad dream and were relieved it wasn't reality?" his voice distorts through the cordless mic. *"Well this wasn't a bad dream. This was reality – in its purest form".*

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