



moe. *No Guts, No Glory*

Over a journey spanning nearly a quarter-century, moe. has let their knack for dynamic, democratic improvisation influence nearly every facet of the band's existence. In concert, they stretch the boundaries of their source material into intricate, set-long suites where distinct songs seamlessly segue into one another in exhilarating fashion. "We've honed this telepathy on stage," explains drummer Vinnie Amico. "We know how to play with each other. The whole band moves together."

Behind the scenes, moe. continues to evolve – to test their musicianship and songwriting while growing as an ensemble – by applying the same resourcefulness and willingness to take risks to their studio recordings. Their new album, fittingly titled *No Guts, No Glory* and available May 27, 2014 on Sugar Hill Records, finds moe. at their most inventive, infectious, and resilient. The album's eleven songs (fourteen on the deluxe digital and double vinyl editions) took a winding path into existence, as the band's initial intentions fell victim to logistical hurdles. "Sometimes you have to adapt on the fly and just improvise," says guitarist and vocalist Chuck Garvey. "We had these songs that were written with an acoustic album in mind. But we ended up making a whole different thing."

To enhance the release of the band's last album, 2012's *What Happened to the La Las*, moe. cut acoustic versions of some of the songs as bonus material. The experience suggested a potential new avenue for their wide-ranging hybrid of roots music, Zappa-inspired mischief, psychedelic explorations, and timeless, melodic pop. A suitably rustic studio was lined up, along with a producer with an acoustic sensibility. "But," Garvey says, "before long, for a variety of reasons, that all fell apart...our whole goal was shot down."

"When we realized everything wasn't working out," recalls percussionist Jim Loughlin, "We all just gathered in a hotel room and started shooting out ideas."

Bassist and vocalist Rob Derhak picks up the story: "I decided to put it out there...'What if we had Dave Aron do the album?' And everyone said, 'That could be amazing...'"

For a long stretch that ended with the making of *What Happened to the La Las*, moe. hadn't even employed producers – relying instead on the resolutely democratic methods that have made them so successful on stage and in previous studio outings. "It became apparent to us," says guitarist and vocalist Al Schnier, "that sometimes we're way too democratic for our own good. It's a good thing, and it's why we all get along and work well together. But it means everything is going to take a bit longer. We can't always make a decision because we're all being really fair."

"When we finally worked with John Travis on *La Las*," says Loughlin, "it was the first time we had an actual producer who settled disagreements immediately. It worked out really well."

On paper, Aron seemed like an unusual, intriguing choice. While possessing an eclectic sensibility and experience in a number of genres, Aron has distinguished himself over the past twenty years as a go-to hip-hop engineer and producer, facilitating albums by Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, and many others. "But he's also worked with Prince and U2," Amico explains. "He's rooted in rock. He went to Memphis University, he was into the Grateful Dead... Hip-hop is where he carved his niche, but he's got an ear for rock."

Aron was also a longtime moe. friend, fan, and ally. "Years ago," Derhak says, "we did a show where Banyan opened up for us at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York. Dave was playing clarinet with them."

"We've been friends ever since," Schnier says. "Every time we'd be in Los Angeles, he'd come to our shows, have a beer. So it was more like 'Why don't we work with Dave?' as opposed to 'How about the guy who worked with Snoop and Tupac?'"

Agreeing to fly east, Aron spent a productive month in the studio with moe., working on a mix of brand new material and unrecorded songs that the group had tested out in concert – almost all of which were originally intended for the abandoned acoustic album. "As we were recording," Derhak explains, "we decided it would be good to have some acoustic instrument on every song. So, while we were plugged in and had full drums, there is also an acoustic element running throughout the album."

"Just adding that one spice to the mix definitely changed the presentation," adds Garvey. "With the mindset of an album that is a little more rootsy, the songwriting went in a certain direction. Then it got bent in another direction. In that way, we actually did something a little more unique because we came at it from that different direction."

The acoustic foundation of *No Guts, No Glory* adds a buoyancy and richness to the album's songs and performances, which are put across with an energetic, spontaneous feel true to moe.'s well-earned reputation as a thrilling live band. "Dave basically wanted to emulate a show," says Loughlin. "He knows our crowd, he knows what our audience wants to hear, and that's what he wanted to capture. He was focused on the vibe."

"We wanted the live-in-the-studio feel," Garvey adds, "that organic push and pull of time changing and all of us reacting. That's something that a lot of music right now tends to lose..."

No Guts, No Glory opens with the elliptical riff of Garvey's ominous "Annihilation Blues." "That song was intended to be this acoustic, dirge-like blues thing," Garvey reflects. "It ended up being more of a pile-driver electric song with that acoustic underpinning to it. It's definitely more powerful with the electric treatment." Like much of the album, he says, "it's a mix of what it started as and what it could become."

Schnier's expansive "Silver Sun" taps into the band's psychedelic side, as a winding introductory guitar solo ushers in a suite of interconnected themes, both instrumental and vocal. "That was written for a Halloween show," drummer Amico recalls, "and has a bit of a Pink Floyd influence. Al brought in the different sections, and it was up to us to make them fit together – to mold the whole thing to make it cohesive. From our shows, we've really learned how to meld one piece into another through improvisation." The track also benefits immensely from Loughlin's work as a colorist, carefully shading the track with an array of percussive textures. The result is a sophisticated extended performance with impressively fluid modulations. Schnier says, "I think we did three takes of it, top to bottom, live in the studio, and just went with the best one."

The shimmer of the vibraphone, tastefully deployed by Loughlin, has become one of moe.'s sonic hallmarks, as

demonstrated on Derhak's "Same Old Story" – which lends the album its title. "That was definitely a process of trial and error in the studio," Derhak explains, describing the song's unusual instrumental devices. "Dave recorded Vinnie playing and made a loop out of his drum part. We dropped that loop in up front, and it reappears at different spots in the song, along with Vinnie's live drums. The loungey vibe, plus the loop, plus the Farfisa organ Al played, made it weirder and weirder. When it came time for a guitar solo I said 'I don't want any guitar solos on this, let Jim do a vibes solo.'" Loughlin responds with a searching, urgent passage that perfectly reflects the intensity of the song's terse, rapid-fire lyrics.

Ironically, it was Aron who brought *No Guts, No Glory* closest to its acoustic origins, on Derhak's wistful "The Pines and the Apple Tree." "That was the only thing that Dave had a plan for, from beginning to end," Derhak says. "The drums don't even come in until the last quarter of the song." With just shakers, and tambourines, acoustic guitars and mandolin intertwine, building to a nimble electric guitar solo before the drums eventually emerge just as the lyric reaches its emotional peak.

Despite its uncertain beginnings, *No Guts, No Glory* is quintessential moe., from the high lonesome harmonies of "This I Know" to the insightful, brass-flecked pop of "Blond Hair and Blue Eyes," the band and Aron strike an ideal balance between documenting the heart of a strong set of material with their ongoing willingness to explore and improvise. "In the studio," Amico says, "we try to keep the energy high like it would be at a show, while also getting really good snapshot of the songs themselves."

"Looking back," reflects Schnier, "the thing I was most surprised about was just how easy this record was to make. After all the initial setbacks, once we got down to it, it just kept moving along. Everything just seemed to take shape, and it came out great. I doubt that it would come out that way on our own."

"Our whole original idea was bastardized," says Garvey, fondly. "We didn't do what we set out to do, but that happens, but it all worked out well."

"Basically," Derhak concludes, smiling, "everything we started out to do turned into completely something else. An album that was supposed to be an acoustic based album recorded in a barn turned into a hard rock album recorded in Connecticut with a hip-hop producer. Go figure. Typical moe."

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