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TWO GALLANTS Brave the Sophomore Storm By Steven Hanna

What the Toll Tells, the second album from San Francisco's Two Gallants, is a charming little monster of a record that I guarantee you are not entirely ready for. Yeah, you've cut your teeth on plenty of two-pieces in your day, from early Ween to the White Stripes, so you probably think you know how to navigate the spare, skeletal arrangements that duos, for sheer lack of instruments, tend to offer.

Or maybe you're already a big fan of the Black Keys, say, so you've learned a thing or two about bluesy rock, and if you're a music aficionado worth your salt, you must know folksy Americana backwards and forwards. It would thus be perfectly reasonable for you to assume that the thorny Harry Smith-ish narratives of singer/guitarist Adam Stephens, as backed by the fleet-fingered percussion of drummer Tyson Vogel, will sound charmingly familiar just as soon as you cue them up. Well, think again.

"The songs grew every time we practiced, sometimes very unconsciously," recalls Vogel when I ask how a tune like the nine-minute-plus "Threnody in Minor B" came about. "That one actually materialized quite quickly in comparison to some of the other songs on the record," he continues, "but from the first time we played it together, it made a strong impression on me. We actually tried to keep it as a shorter song, but it never felt fully rounded out or natural in that form, so we kept growing it until it found its form in what you hear on the disc."

What you hear is an epic, a song without set shape that develops almost willfully, as if its verses are just as determined to squirm out of Stephens' and Vogel's grasp as the Gallants themselves are to rein them in. Its story is equal parts lament and raised fist, and its dynamics are stunning, ranging from whisper-quiet passages colored by a guest cellist to raging storms that all emit from that single guitar. It feels informed by a life on the rails that neither Gallant ever led, or by a hard-earned world-weariness that these twenty-somethings have no right to understand, and it demands your attention and makes you instantly anxious to live those nine minutes over again. In short, it sounds like nothing you've heard before, or perhaps like a miraculous frontier stew of everything in music that you've long since fallen in love with.

"Being honest in our music - in everything we do - is the most important thing to us," Vogel continues, modestly claiming that his band doesn't consciously attempt to craft songs that are complex or in any way ostentatious. "Actually, I feel more comfortable, more natural, in the way we play music than if we were to

stick to the repeated verse-chorus-verse format. It feels more free to be following the music and story wherever it may take us."

One of the extraordinary things about a shaggy, Jack White-ish rocker like "Las Cruces Jail" or an easygoing shuffle like the caffeinated-Dylan travelin' tune "Steady Rollin'" is the way Vogel's drums contribute to the music rather than simply hold it together.

"The drums are a very sensitive instrument," Vogel insists when I ask about this, "very personal and emotive. I actually feel very unnatural and strange when I play a more obvious, predetermined beat. In the end, the songs dictate how we play them, and they push us, and we push each other. We're just following how we feel."

Fans of the band's 2004 debut, *The Throes*, will be glad to hear that *Two Gallants* haven't changed their signature sound a bit since signing to Omaha's hip Saddle Creek label. Indeed, the biggest surprise of *What the Toll Tells* may be discovering how perfectly Stephens' gotta-get-these-words-out howl fits in with the larynx-on-their-sleeves work of emotional jeremiahs like Conor Oberst and Tim Kasher.

But for the time being, anyway, the band has no intention of following in the collaborative footsteps of their labelmates, who are famous for featuring friends by the dozen on their records. After all, that number in the band's moniker makes it pretty clear exactly how many heads are involved in this music.

"There's a delicate balance of freedom and control when we're creating or playing, or writing or performing together," Vogel muses of his creative relationship with Stephens, "and even though there's only two of us, I have never felt that we have ever been limited by the format. There have been times where certain things haven't felt right, or sounded right, but it reflected not that we were limited, but that we had more to delve into to find our truth in the song."

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