

Grandeur Illusions

Bronze Fawn's Rock of Ice Ages

by [DAVE SEGAL](#)



Dan Wilk

BRONZE FAWN Steve Becker, Bryce Shoemaker, Jim Acquavella.

When Seattle trio Bronze Fawn opened for the reunited Polvo last October at the Crocodile—maybe the most prestigious show in their two-plus years of existence—I had the gall to write a less-than-laudatory review of their performance, drizzling on their parade with damnable faint disparagement like "Bronze Fawn's Sturm und Drang instrumentals, for all their pendulum swings from majesty to contemplation, were more ponderous than thunderous. Their buildups and breakdowns just weren't extreme or interesting enough to challenge their post-rockin' heroes [Mogwai, MONO, Explosions in the Sky]—who... can be pretty dull themselves at times... It was boringly beautiful and beautifully boring." The review caused Bronze Fawn fans to rush to their defense on guitarist Bryce Shoemaker's Facebook page. Virtual fists shook, expletive-filled insults and threats of violence flew, and, amid all the turmoil, a reasonable debate ensued about music and opinions. One thing I discovered is that, for such seemingly mild-mannered gents who make pretty, sometimes stormy, vocal-free rock, Bronze Fawn have some seriously passionate—and vicious—fans.

Initially annoyed enough to post a link to the review and sarcastically joke that Bronze Fawn should quit, Shoemaker soon got over and even came to appreciate the critique.

"It's good to hear things like that and use them as a point of reflection to examine what you can improve on, whether you feel like you actually need to or not," he says with a reasonableness rare for a rock musician. "As for the backlash you noted, I think the internet is a funny fucking place full of all sorts of wonderful things like opinions and cuss words and unabashed criticisms... Watch out for our fans, though. I'm pretty sure most of them have extensive fantasy blade collections that they are more than willing to use at a moment's notice."

Noted. But if its Crocodile set was a bit tepid, the band—which also includes bassist Steve Becker, drummer Jim Acquavella, and video jockey Dan Wilk—made an impressive debut with its 2007 disc, *Lumber* (Woodson Lateral), gaining substantial radio play from KEXP and The End's local-music show. It's a solid collection of instrumentals that rock with force, fluid instrumental interplay, and the occasional burst of mathy complexity, while offering plenty of contemplative melodies.

Many have called Bronze Fawn's music "post-rock," which is a dirty term in some people's minds, including Shoemaker's. To this writer, post-rock can be construed as a species of soul music made by introverted white people or as a kind of classical music for those uncomfortable with the stuffy formality of that genre. Of course, most musicians hate pigeonholing, but shorthand signifiers often help potential listeners find a way into a band's art. Shoemaker's not having it.

"Post-, math-, prog-, psych-rock have always been horrible descriptors through the years," he gripes. "They explain nothing and only serve to complicate things in their attempt to simplify the categorization of bands that are, in actuality, creating this wide spectrum of music. You're pretty accurate with your personal description of the genre there, and while I love Talk Talk, Tortoise, and Sigur Rós, the term post-rock tends to bring one sensation to mind: boredom. 'Instrumental rock' is a much more preferable term; it's not trying to pretend to be anything that it isn't, and it's kept honest by its base nature."

That being said, Shoemaker envisions Bronze Fawn slightly changing course in the future.

"We have talked of incorporating vocals and synths, and making things more metal and making things more ambient, and this and that and such and so. We're always talking and finding ways to put things into practice in order to further grow as a band."

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's discuss Bronze Fawn's new sophomore full-length, the self-released, Matt Bayles-produced *Life Among Giants*. On the new album, the band really gets expansive and epic (see especially the 19-minute, three-part suite "Rise of the Megalodon"), whereas on *Lumber*, the pieces are more concise and tightly wound, although the last two songs on the debut hint at *Giants*' wide-screen ambitions. Were the new compositions a reaction to *Lumber*?

"Not so much a reaction as a natural progression," Shoemaker says. "Our keys player [Joshua Robertson] split, which meant there was suddenly more clarity between instruments in addition to providing Steve and myself with more sonic space to work with. From the first to second album, we made a conscious effort to make the songs more thematic and consistent, more memorable and easier to attach to than those on *Lumber*. At times, songs on *Lumber* can sound like a bunch of parts tossed together, and that was something we wanted to get away from with the new album.

"There was also a lot of experimentation with how to use some of that newly acquired aural real estate, by either eating it up entirely with volume or all but disappearing in it by keeping things minimal. *Life Among Giants* represents our drive to further explore dynamics, structure, and space, all tidily nestled behind an adorable theme of isolation, death, and evolution during the last great ice age."

True, Bronze Fawn's website describes *Life Among Giants* as scoring geological events from the distant past, which sounds like fanciful fabricating, but Shoemaker is sincere about this inspiration. And once you absorb these tracks' tumultuous ebbs and flows, vibrant textures, and grandiose melodies, his rationales begin to make sense.

"In writing this group of songs, things were beginning to sound cold and desolate, yet also quite lush and triumphant, and the names we were giving to the songs [e.g., 'Buried for Millennia,' 'Not Too Tropical'] were reflective of those contrasting feelings," Shoemaker observes. "A theme was beginning to emerge, and we felt the need to adopt a central concept that would logically frame everything: the death of great beasts and the emergence of modern humans during the Pleistocene era. This proved to be a solid choice, as it made album-related decisions—such as flow between songs and what we wanted for artwork—much more obvious to us."

Lest you think Bronze Fawn take themselves too seriously (an impression that could be reinforced by watching them stoically launch their magniloquent tunes onstage), they're not above some witty self-deprecation.

"It might be good to keep in mind that we're a bunch of goobers [who] watch a little bit too much History and Discovery Channel for our own good, rather than some pretentious assholes trying to force a concept down your throat," Shoemaker says. "Think of it as a score to a documentary that has not been filmed—incredibly nerdy shit. With or without the concept in mind, my hope is that listeners will listen from end to end and engage in the sense of journey we put forth, whether it's while cleaning their apartment, driving through the mountains, or making sweet love in the back of a Geo Metro."