

Fun. - A biography

Iggy Pop was wrong. There is, in fact, fun.

fun. is what happens when three extraordinarily talented musicians come together to create something altogether new and wonderful. Nate Ruess, late of The Format, has teamed up with ex-Anathallo multi-instrumentalist Andrew Dost and Steel Train's Jack Antonoff, resulting in their ingenious debut, "AIM AND IGNITE." The trio melds a stunning array of diverse inspirations - spanning Broadway to The Beach Boys, "NILSSON SCHMILSSON" to "PINKERTON" - into an irresistible collection of freewheeling pop songcraft. Songs like "Benson Hedges" and "All The Pretty Girls" are fit to burst with richly prolix lyricism and intricate melodic twists and turns, which provide plenty of room for Ruess' distinctive vocals to soar. With "AIM AND IGNITE," fun. have crafted something special indeed, a contemporary rethinking of classic 70s pop, where ornate arrangements and inspired orchestrations meet present-day rock 'n' roll.

As 2008 began, Ruess was living the dream, with The Format having ascended from its origins in suburban Arizona to modern rock stardom and critical acclamation. But after almost a decade as friends and bandmates, the personal relationships among the group had begun eroding and in February, The Format decided to split. Shocked, though not entirely surprised, Ruess opted to turn the crisis into an opportunity, taking his newfound freedom as the chance to explore previously untapped musical options.

"People called and said, 'I don't know what you're gonna do now,'" Ruess says. "To me, it was like, are you kidding? I know exactly what I'm gonna do!

"In the back of my mind, I'd always wanted to work with other people," he continues. "Especially after working with the same people for eight years. It's a lot like getting married at a young age - you begin to wonder about what you haven't experienced."

Just one day after being told The Format was no more, Ruess reached out to multi-instrumentalist Andrew Dost, late of the elastic experimental ensemble Anathallo. The two had initially bonded when Anathallo supported The Format on tour, with Ruess floored by Dost's astonishing versatility, ranging from piano to glockenspiel to

flugelhorn - often in the space of just one song. Moreover, the Michigan-based Dost's musical interests ran parallel to Ruess' own, especially his affinity for showtunes, as evinced on his 2008 musical, "COLUMBUS!"

"We developed a mutual respect for each other," Dost recalls. "We never directly talked about it, but there was such an admiration there that we kind of knew that we'd want to work together in the future."

"I always thought Andrew was unbelievable," Ruess says. "He can play anything. I thought, this is a guy I want to work with."

To indulge "my rock nature" Ruess dialed his longtime friend, guitarist Jack Antonoff of Steel Train. Though the two artists had butted heads while touring together with their respective bands, Ruess and Antonoff ultimately formed a lasting friendship.

"Me and Nate used to hate each other," Antonoff says. "But some of the people I end up liking the most in life I start out hating. We kind of had a weird vibe on each other. We toured together in 2004 and the first couple of days it was like, 'Grrrr. This guy.' But after like three days we became best friends and we've been incredibly close ever since.

"Playing together was inevitable," he continues. "It was just a question of when that time would be. When he called me and said, 'Let's do it,' it was kind of a no-brainer. I said, 'Great. Let's do it.'"

A week later, Ruess and Dost were in New Jersey, where they set to work in Antonoff's parents' living room. Ruess - who composes his elaborate melodies and adventurous song structures without actually

playing an instrument - found in Dost and Antonoff the ideal foils for his artistic ambitions.

"It was just crazy," Ruess says. "I was able to convey a basic message, we all talked about it, and then they got it from there. They were as open to trying new things as I was. They are fearless artists and that's just an amazing thing, to work with people like that. It felt great."

"It's so fun to crack the code," Dost says, "to hear one of Nate's melodies and try to understand where it fits into the song as a whole. To hear him sing a melody and try to match that up to a musical idea of mine."

Having already formed strong individual identities, the three musicians adapted to fit the constraints of their new collaboration. Each member changed their approach with every song, discovering how to fit together as a band.

"It just fell into a good balance of each other's abilities," Dost says. "It's just this triad of different skills, different ideas that happen to blend together in a really great way."

"Without sounding like an asshole, I think we each bring something really interesting, that's very separate," Antonoff says. "The biggest element that destroys a band is people not knowing what they're good at. With this project, there's this incredibly healthy balance, with everyone really excited about what each other is bringing to the music."

With an album's worth of demos in hand, fun. headed west to properly record their debut with Redd Kross' Steven McDonald behind the board. McDonald had previously produced The Format's "DOG PROBLEMS," a collaboration that resulted in a now-classic album and somewhat of a prickly relationship with Ruess.

"It was weird," Ruess says. "There was animosity between us at first, but we hashed it out. It was awesome. He didn't know Andrew or Jack but within the first two days, he was like, 'I can't believe what we're working on here. This crushes anything I've ever done.'"

fun. and McDonald spent August 2008 working at Kingsize Soundlabs, in the Eagle Rock area of Los Angeles, followed by further recording in Redd Kross' longtime practice space. The move proved ideal for the ambitious project, effectively taking the meter off the creative process.

"It was great," Dost says. "We were able to try out any idea we wanted and not worry about how much it was costing us."

McDonald became the de facto fourth member of fun. , playing bass throughout the sessions while simultaneously helping to define the band's grand, fantastical sound. Songs like the album-opening "Be Calm" meld finely wrought chamber-pop orchestrations - all brass and strings and multi-tracked harmonies - with guitar-fueled rock 'n' roll, resulting in a distinctive sound which simultaneously recalls the past while remaining very current indeed.

"Sometimes I battled this fine line," Ruess says. "Do I want to make a record that sounds like a 70s record? Or do I go completely to the other end of the spectrum and make a Gwen Stefani type of record? Steven, with his chops, was able to make it sound like both of those things."

"Steve had a big hand in bringing that modern hi-fi aspect to the sound," Dost says. "He just knew what sounds needed to be where to bring it into the 21 st Century."

"The last thing any of us wanted was to make a retro record," Antonoff adds. "When you start out, it's all about the old bands, but I think over the past couple of years we've all become proud of playing music in the time that we're playing it in."

"AIM AND IGNITE" is up-to-the-minute pop, vibrant and alive, with no boundaries to restrain its passion and resourcefulness. Take, for example, "At Least I'm Not As Sad (As I Used To Be)," which suggests the

heretofore unimagined sound of Caribbean Queen, with Ruess belting extravagantly over a backdrop of festive horns and steel drums. "Barlights" - arranged by longtime Ruess fave Roger Joseph Manning Jr. (Jellyfish, Imperial Drag, Moog Cookbook) - is brash and brassy blue-eyed soul, while Dost's "Light A Roman Candle With Me" is rollicking and Randy Newman-esque, spiked by Antonoff's unexpectedly edgy guitars. From song to song, "AIM AND IGNITE" abounds with creative vigor, fusing complex gospel-inspired harmonies and sophisticated theatrical melodies onto the pop rock framework.

"It's the record that we had all hoped we were capable of making," Dost says. "We had all wanted to make a pop record that had all these other elements. It's fun for us to indulge our poppier fantasies while still hopefully keeping the complexity and innovation that we're all striving for as artists."

The buoyant tunes only serve to amplify the intensity and depth of Ruess' expansive, introspective lyrics. "AIM AND IGNITE" sees Ruess celebrating all the things that give life meaning and what it takes to achieve them, with the album-closing "Take Your Time (Coming Home)" finding the songwriter struggling to comprehend the breakup of The Format.

"It's all about what I had to give up to get here," Ruess says of the album's overall subject matter. "I didn't understand what had happened. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what is it that I'm doing wrong as a person. That kind of ended up being the theme of the record - wondering what there is to hold onto as you get older."

fun. is first and foremost about the bond, both professional and personal, that unites these three amazing musicians. For his part, Ruess - who recently moved from his lifelong home in Arizona to the wilds of downtown Brooklyn - can't help but to be thrilled by the surprising path his life has taken. Simply put, he's having fun .

"I enjoy seeing how far I've come along," Ruess says. "I've come along as far in the last year as I did in the six years that I was in the band. Musically and as a human being.

"There's nowhere I'd rather be than making music with these guys," he adds. "Even on a personal level, as friends, it feels right."