

YOUNG GALAXY



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PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHE COLLETTE

To get this out of the way, Young Galaxy are not Stars. Sure, the band is from Montréal, they use male-female vocals to a pleasing effect, they play spacey pop music, have cosmological names, and Young Galaxy's main songwriter (Stephen Ramsey) was Stars' touring guitarist. But that's where the similarities end.

Ramsey and his girlfriend of five years, Catherine McCandless, play slow and atmospheric pop music. It's catchy but brooding, with more traditional harmonies than Stars' back-and-forth vocal interplay. So, while Stars and Young Galaxy have some obvious similarities, comparing the two musically—like many rock critics do—is, as Ramsey says, too easy.

"I thought it was funny when we were called a more gothic version of Stars," says Ramsey, on the phone from a Toronto restaurant. "It's like when people say, 'Don't you think so and so looks like Jennifer Aniston?' 'Wow I don't think that at all. It's just because they have long brown hair.' Making broad comparisons is a little lazy."

Ramsey doesn't really care why the comparisons are being made. He's just thankful that people are listening to his music and that Arts & Crafts—and Stars—gave him a chance.

Two years ago, at 29, Ramsey was living in his hometown of Vancouver, writing music for himself in his bedroom and had never played in a band. He and McCandless wanted a change, so they moved to Montréal. In what can only be described as fate, their friend Torquil Campbell, frontman for Stars, was looking for a touring guitarist. Campbell gave Ramsey the job.

"The band had no idea who I was," says Ramsey about the phone call Campbell made

to tell the other band members about their new addition. "They thought, 'The guy's never been in a band, can he play guitar?' Thankfully he offered me up, as he puts it, on the strengths of my personality, rather than my guitar playing."

When Ramsey and McCandless moved to Montréal in 2005 all eyes were on the Great White North's multi-cultural city. Arcade Fire were breaking, while Wolf Eyes, The Stills and Stars were garnering big name American press. The exposure plunged Ramsey into a musical social scene he never knew in Vancouver. "The difference between Montréal and Vancouver is huge. I met people immediately by being thrust into this community of people. Suddenly, I'm playing basketball with the guys from Arcade Fire. Everywhere I turned, there were people who were doing it for real. It was very inspiring."

Being surrounded by professional musicians gave Ramsey something he lacked in Vancouver: confidence. Until joining Stars, he wasn't sure if he was good enough, or if he actually could make a career out of playing music. Touring the world, honing his guitar chops and learning the ropes from Campbell are the main reasons why Young Galaxy exists today. "I felt more like a credible musician after playing with Stars. I had accomplished something significant. I have a lot less insecurity as a result. Now I feel I've paid my dues, so it was really good timing for me to [start a band]."

While Ramsey always hoped that one day he'd start a successful group, McCandless had no such thoughts. "She was very shy," says Ramsey, who's known her since their late teens.

Ramsey had to push McCandless to show off her pipes. He knew she could sing—when

she was a kid she sang on a children's record—but she constantly refused. After a night of drinking, she agreed to sing on one condition: Ramsey had to listen to her from a different room. That moment opened the floodgates and now, says Ramsey, he's "created a monster." "It was a slow thawing-out of her abilities. Now she sings everywhere."

The two joined forces to create Young Galaxy (also with bassist Stephen Kamp, guitarist Stephen Durand, keyboardist Susan Beckett and drummer Pat Sayers), recording the band's self-titled debut in Montréal with Besnard Lakes frontman, Jace Lasek. Filled with epic electronics, clean, repetitive guitars and measured but still intimate melodies, their first effort is an ambitious one that Arts & Crafts fans will quickly scoop up.

While Ramsey doesn't think his band sounds like Stars, he isn't adverse to Spiritualized comparisons. "I wanted to make an epic record in the style of a band like The Verve or Spiritualized," he says. "Growing up, I loved British music, music that was able to tackle epic ideas or present music in a way that's very overwhelming."

And that's exactly what he did. "Lazy Religion" is airy and emotionally intense, while "No Matter How Hard You Try" is an ominous and epic, keyboard-filled track. It's all pretty powerful stuff.

With such a strong, passionate project to concentrate on, Ramsey has, understandably, left Stars. But leaving the band that gave him his start wasn't as hard as one might think: "The transition from Stars to this just feels right. It was the right time to go out and express myself."