WHO IS MGMT?

BY: NICK HOWARD

"Who is MGMT"- This may be a grammatically incorrect question, but an important one regarding one of the most significant bands in modern music. In fact it is the phrase that greets you when you log onto the band's website. It is like the band is challenging the modern world to define the group. On a basic level it consists of original founders Andrew VanWyngarden and Ben Goldwasser and recent members Matthew Asti, James Richardson and Will Bermon. Andrew and Ben formed the group in 2002 while in college and never looked back. The three new members were part of the touring band that performed with MGMT in concert. Andrew and Ben invited them to join the band during the recording of their most recent album. Congratulations. The sound that MGMT produces is more complicated to list than a band roster. At times it fits the indie/alternative label with flavors of electronica and psychedelic pop. Sometimes these flavors take over the sounds and the listener is left wondering "Who is MGMT?". Finally fewer answers can be found in MGMT's career path. Starting out as a college project known as "The Management.", they became indie darlings, pioneers, and finally rebels against success. Their first release came in 2004, an EP named Time to Pretend, was a five song sampling of what was possible. In 2007 they released their first full length album Oracular Spectacular and a thirteen and a half minute long single named Metanoia in 2008. Congratulations entered a waiting world last April. Each release sounded a little bit different and took MGMT to places they never visited before; adding even more to the mystery of "Who is MGMT?"

The concept of a band that puzzles a musical world while captivating them at the same time is not a new one. In varying degrees there have always been bands that just did not seem to make any sense. Bob Dylan wrote lyrics that people are still trying to decode. The chords that Brian Wilson wrote on The Beach Boys' album Pet Sounds still haven't been figured out. Neil Young would change his mind about releasing recordings on a daily basis. But one band in particular I believe could hold the key to understanding MGMT: Pink Floyd. One the greatest band in Rock n Roll history, it formed in 1960's England. The original members were Roger Waters on Bass, Nick Mason on Drums, Richard Wright on Keyboard and Syd Barrett on Guitar. Barrett would leave the band in 1968 following two singles and an album release. A guitar player named David Gilmour would join the band to fill the musical gap left. Waters would take over as the chief lyric writer. Pink Floyd would go onto release some of Rock's most famous and influential albums. The sound of them at times was bizarre and almost unlistenable but other albums blended music and art together to form sounds that seemed to paint pictures. Today Pink Floyd is retired as a band and there are plenty of people who can answer the question "What was Pink Floyd?"

There are several similarities between MGMT and Pink Floyd that allow for the lines of comparison to be drawn between them. First, both bands experienced membership changes early on in their career. The addition of Matt, James and Will to MGMT has had only one recording to define it but it has already changed things. While recording Oracular Spectacular Andrew and Ben had to handle all of the instrumental and singing duties. The album's tracks were salads of over dubs added over time forming songs. The sound on Congratulations is one of a band playing together like they are on a stage but experiencing the creative power of the studio. The addition of Gilmour to Pink Floyd shifted the band. Under Barrett, they were a psychedelic band that fitted the late 1960's. Pink Floyd would go through an experimental phase but would ultimately settle down as a successful experimental and art rock band. We as listeners will just have to wait to see if MGMT's next album is like Oracular Spectacular, Congratulations or something completely different.

No matter how it sounds, the ideas behind the album should be noted. Pink Floyd is known for its concept albums. In fact, starting with Dark Side of the Moon in 1972, every album Pink Floyd released had a concept behind it. So far, MGMT's albums have not as concrete of concepts. Congratulations comes close with the ideas expressed in the album's final and title track. The listener finally learns that MGMT was aiming to make an album not for success but for the sake of making an album. Maybe this would have explained the whole album and could have better served to be expressed in an earlier track. Personally, I believe that MGMT has the ability to release a modern day concept album that could stand the test of time. Andrew and Ben's imaginations and musical abilities are great enough that the potential is there, they just have to do it. The decision they make may begin to answer the question "Who is MGMT?'

Sometimes, the concept behind an album can get lost on a listener and he or she is only able to comprehend how the album sounds. Well so far, there are some striking similar sounding songs by MGMT and Pink Floyd. One in particular is the single Metanoia. On the basic level, its length is very Pink Floyd like. They released more long songs on one album than most bands do in their entire recording career. Their album Animals is just three songs long but still enough minutes for a full album. Metanoia is composed of what seems to be several individual songs strung together. Each part has a distinctive sound to it. This is a characteristic of another MGMT song, the eleven minute long track Siberian Breaks on Congratulations and of several Pink Floyd songs. One great example of this is the song Dogs from Animals. Back to Metanoia it has theatrical sound to it. I can almost picture it being performed on stage or screen. Oh wait, Pink Floyd did that with their entire album The Wall with a movie of the same title in 1983. The psychedelic sound of Congratulations is one that defined early Pink Floyd under Barrett. If MGMT continues to make music sounding like that, it will be safe to compare them to early Pink Floyd. But will they branch out and make music sounding like later Pink Floyd? We will just have to wait.

So for now, I do not want to declare MGMT the Pink Floyd of our generation but I will also not rule it out. I know that an article of this nature should be definitive but when it comes to music, interpretation is what makes it personal. A person can hear something in a song that no one else hears. In MGMT, I hear the potential to become the next Pink Floyd and the possible answers to "Who is MGMT?"



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