

# THE SECRET MACHINES

## ONE MORE TIME, WITH VOLUME

by Chris Martins photography by Piper Ferguson

Let's say you're in a band. It's the year 2000, the month of November, and you're in New York, which means the Strokes just finished up their Mercury Lounge residency and casual-but-well-constructed three-minute garage ditties are quickly becoming rent checks and/or excuses to move. And it's cold (Winter, New York, duh). And your band just moved from Dallas, Texas, where it had lived warmly long enough not to know otherwise ("otherwise" being freezing-your-balls-off frigid). Yeah. Oh, and you play space-rock, so you're hungry. And it's morning, so you're probably hung-over.

After assuming your condition to be one of blindness, you realize (quite slowly) that in actuality your eyelids have glued themselves shut in an attempt to block out the day. It doesn't work. The day wins and it's now beating your pupils into small, defensive dots, which are in turn fighting to make sense of well, anything. The words "Secret Machines" are everywhere...on equipment and clothing, in your head, scribbled on notepaper. There are beer cans and tequila bottles, dirty bowls and lots of dark hair everywhere. Three beds in the middle, one mess of a human in each, a battle station of instruments to the right, and an opposing fort of CDs and speakers to the left. Home. Sweet. Home.

"No, we had hot water, we just had to microwave it first," says Benjamin Curtis, the slim-framed, long-featured singer and guitarist of the Secret Machines. He looks a bit breakable, and by no means built for brittle weather.

"But what did you do for work?"

"Temp agencies," says Josh Garza, trying to free a drum clamp from its plastic case by stabbing it with a

pen. "We worked in restaurants so we could eat for free. Ben worked in a music store, so we got a lot of gear for free..."

"For free?"

Ben grins: "We were forced into a life of crime."

We're in the "green room" backstage at the Wiltern in Los Angeles. The band's been touring since February and it's almost November again (2004). In three hours they'll be taking over the theatre's historic stage (opening for Interpol) to play to a packed house for the second night in a row. Ben's brother Brandon (bassist, keyboardist, sometimes singer) ran off in search of clean clothes, and these two have settled—momentarily—onto an ugly off-white couch with God-knows-what bleached out of its cushions. Aside from that part about gearing up to play to 2,400 people, it's not hard to transpose the entire scene onto their old Brooklyn loft. "I think we had ten days straight off once and it was weird," says Josh. His giant body is slowly enveloping the sofa. "You start getting into the seventh or eighth day and you're like, 'Man, I am wasting oxygen. I'm waking up late, I'm eating, I'm probably getting high, I'm drinking, but I'm not doing anything.'"

"It really threw us off, we all sank into some weird kind of depression...withdrawals, I guess." Ben is perched on the edge of the couch like he's scared of getting sucked into Josh's orbit. He's fidgety. And even Josh can't keep his eyes from that big generic clock in the corner for too long. You get the feeling that it's been this way since they met: all nervous energy, rock 'n' rollisms, and constant movement. At the very least, it explains the tequila. And the decision to leave their warm Southern safe haven for the East Coast in the dead of winter.







## WE'RE JUST FEELING IT. WE'VE NEVER HAD TO FAKE IT.

Let's say you're in a band, or several actually. You're in your hometown, so the year doesn't matter. You wake up one day—comfortable—blink yourself into existence, and suddenly realize that despite the friends and the family, the existence of something roughly scene-like, the preponderance of space-rock on a local level, and all of the potluck dinner/group improv nights that you've helped organize and partaken in, not much of anything is going on, really. At least it seems that way. But your feet have turned into spinning wheels (at least it seems that way). And you can't stay, but where would you go if you left, and, hell, actually, New York sounds fine enough. And you're gone.

"Home," says Josh, leaning forward, clapping his hands, then releasing them with a matter-of-factness that leaves indents on the couch. "It was home. Just the classic tale of going on your search for whatever you're looking for. The story goes way back."

"How did it end up being the three of you guys together?"

"We were probably the only three that were in every band," says Ben.

Out of several Dallas musical permutations (UFOFU, Captain Audio, Comet, Ben played in Tripping Daisy for a while), the Secret Machines emerged and drove straight to Chicago, rehearsed and recorded an EP



with producer Brian Deck (Modest Mouse, Tortoise, the Sea and Cake), didn't stop long enough to give it a proper name (*September 000*, as in, when it was recorded), and continued on to NYC. They took their massive sound—with its Tangerine Dream-meets-Flaming Lips eccentricity buttressed by a Zeppelin flare for energy and bulk—to whatever tiny club they could cram it into. While the unaffected were tapping their toes to the latest "Last Nite," Garza and the Brothers Curtis were playing to enthusiastic art house crowds, sharing the stage with locals like Sonic Youth's Lee Ranaldo, No Wave heroes James Chance and the Contortions, and spoken word rock legend Jim Carroll.

"It was perfect," says Josh. "We were three guys who were really open to new things, and then we're in New York, and we're in a band, and so we just started letting everything filter in. Everything—art galleries, music, hipsters, obscure minimalist composers...it's like all these things start adding up."

And instead of getting colder in New York amongst ice and intellectualism, the music got warmer. And noticeably louder. Words like "pounding," "thundering," "lumbering," "walls" and "arenas" begin to stick to their reputation, and when they were given a chance to record a full-length record, the Secret Machines made something heavy, experimental, huge and uniquely visceral called *Now Here is Nowhere* (released in May, on Reprise). They effectively fit 35 years of rock—starting with the Band and ending with Ride—into 50 minutes and nine songs. And just when it seems the sound might spiral into unfolding atmosphere and creeping melody, in comes that pounding, thundering, thumping, wall of arena-sized rhythm. And out went the day jobs, and in came the press and an MTV 28 Bill show with the Killers and non-stop touring and Interpol and the rest.

Let's say you're in a band—you're the Secret Machines. You've just had an amazing year, and everything seems poised to make the next one even better. No, not just "better," 2005 will be it. And you're sitting on a couch between soundcheck and a dinner meeting, talking to a silly man asking silly questions, and saying silly things like, "We saw Jay-Z the other night in Minneapolis. He was just playing his record and standing there, but *man* that guy's got presence. We just do it another way...You know, with volume." And "That's why we got into it: 'Did you see that one band that actually rocked?' Most bands don't; it's just not their thing." And "We're just feeling it. We've never had to fake it." And as silly as it may sound—like Christopher Guest as Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnel, gesturing to his custom amps and insisting, "These go to 11"—it's true, you aren't faking it. This oddly placed moment in time and space is positively home-like.

And when the Wiltern's curtains open tonight (when *any* curtains open and you're crouched behind waiting to pounce like some kind of three-headed, snake-tailed beast), you're going to envelope the stage, the crowd, every sound in the room, and make it all yours—one big filthy rock 'n' roll loft party with drugs and drink and nervous energy and broken glass and sweaty heads and craggy skin and messy hair and stabbing metal and noise, noise, noise. Because, well, you're the Secret Machines. That's what you do. You don't rest, you rock. Home could be a warm place with a bed, but why bother? Out here it's loud as hell. **F**