

Champagne, Whiskey, Tea and Spit: A Guide to the Bands in \$5 Cover Universe

Champagne Champagne

Rapper Pearl Dragon is one of those people who seems to be everywhere, doing everything. He was raised in Seattle, lived in Houston, and once drove a car through the South ahead of a man trying to prove he could ride his bike across the country after gastric bypass surgery. (Ask him about it sometime.) No one's surprised to hear Pearl talk about finding himself in the studio with rap royalty OutKast or hitting the road with Spank Rock. "It seems accidental, but I put myself in situations and make things happen," he says. Pearl formed the hip-hop outfit Champagne Champagne with Thomas Gray and DJ Gajamagic – whom Seattleites know as drummer Mark Gajadhar from punk's the Blood Brothers – and the band wasted no time scoring gigs at Seattle's prime clubs. Champagne Champagne's lyrics mix life in Seattle's Central District (CD) with cultural touchstones like Pop Rocks, Molly Ringwald and Oshkosh kids clothes. When the lyrics get rough (see the police brutality track, "Radio Raheem"), there's music close by to get the body rocking ("What's Your Fantasy"). It's music for a rainy city in recession. If you're down, Champagne Champagne will tell you you've got good reason. And if you're up, well hey, they're gonna take you higher.

Corespondents

It's perfectly fitting to write a single sentence about Corespondents and leave it at that. Corespondents, after all, are minimalist in their art. The band – guitarists Olie Eshleman and Doug Arney and percussionist Kieran Harrison – has been described more than once as making "soundtrack music." And while their music has been used in film, what most people mean by the description is that the Corespondents' spacious, mostly instrumental songs leave plenty of room for listeners to enter, to imagine, to envision their own stories being enveloped by the sounds. It's music for walking around your city. It's music for packing up the boxes after a bad breakup. It's music for meditation. Corespondents are certainly of the scene in Seattle, but they're not the kind of band you picture stumbling out of clubs after shows, wasted groupies on each arm. It seems more likely to find them at home immersed in the mysteries of an old John Fahey guitar record. Corespondents are the kind of band to have a standing Monday night gig (which they've had, at Café Racer in the University District). They make Sunday afternoon music. But now we've said too much, no?

GOD

Talk about an understated name. (Seattle has a history of rock understatement: remember Sub Pop Records' modest plans for "world domination?") Of course GOD founder, guitarist and singer Ian LeSage doesn't consider himself a deity. The band's origins are humble, in fact, growing from LeSage's computer-recorded demos. After writing and recording, he enlisted the help of friends to take over bass, keyboards, drums and cello. While the band's indie-rock instrumentation sounds like a more aggressive take on influences like Radiohead or the Postal Service, LeSage's vocals include a healthy dose of punk rock sneer, not to mention a bit of self-flagellation. "She's smarter than me/ She works in a lab," he spits in "Anti-Robots," "She tells me some things/ I don't understand." Sometimes the distain extends out to the whole of human endeavors: "How do we think that we are the best thing to ever come?" he asks on "H.P. Lovecraft Killed Hieronymus Bosch." But GOD isn't the only thing on LeSage's mind. He is one of several "\$5 Cover: Seattle" denizens who splits his time between groups. Look for him behind the guitar in Whiskey Tango, as well.

The Lights

The Lights sound reckless. Not careening down the California coast reckless. More like, "Hmm, I wonder what'll happen when I mix these two things together?" reckless. The kind of reckless that dares to drop a pile of seriously tweaked noises on a song, on the off chance that it may be just what the tune needs.

Bassist Jeff Albertson, guitarist Craig Chambers and drummer P.J. Rogalski weren't born and bred in the Seattle scene. The band's roots are in Pullman, Wa. – on the other side of the Cascade Mountains from Seattle, which might as well be in another, hotter, drier, more conservative state – and Boise, Idaho. Even their record label, Wäntage USA, is based in Missoula, Mont. All of which is just to say the Lights do things their own way. "Do Your Worst" is a ragtag take on 1960s garage rock songwriting. "Blow Your Mind," on the other hand, opens with an avalanche of discordant guitar strumming and moves on to revel in bent notes and cymbals that smash like boulders on a roadside. The Lights' muse speaks to them only. And they listen, which is one reason among many that they've become key figures in the Seattle music community.

The Maldives

"The community is only as good as the people that make up the community," says Jason Dodson, singer, songwriter and guitarist for country rockers the Maldives. "Right now, the Seattle music community is made up of really good people, very sincere and affable people." Dodson knows from good people. Forty-odd musicians have passed through the ranks of his band in a handful of years, and the lineup today stands at nine members. The Maldives' layered, textured sound stands in contrast to Dodson's simple, direct lyrics. "Goodbye," the wide-open first track from the Maldives' acclaimed *Listen to the Thunder* album, has a mere 10 words to it (but they all count). A sense of place looms large for Dodson. "Home, keep the home fires burning," he sings on the chorus to "Tequila Sunday," "Home, let the old country win." And yet Dodson's is by no means a narrow outlook. His music orbit intersects that of hip-hop crew Champagne Champagne along with roots-rock compatriots the Moondoggies. "The Seattle music community is amazing," Dodson says. "There's something going on now, where we've created this strange, cross-over, without-genre boundless blend of American music we can work on together."

The Moondoggies

There's a view to be had that Seattle's signature sound is noise: Boeing jets, Hendrix feedback, espresso machines, Mudhoney's howl. And then there are the Moondoggies. Guitarist Kevin Murphy, keyboard player Caleb Quick and drummer Carl Dahlen have built their rootsy band around three-part harmonies (bassist Robert Terreberry steers clear of the mic), and their warm blend fits their songs like the best broken-in boots. "Don't be a stranger," they call out on "Old Hound," and it feels like an invitation to a family reunion. Their own songs sit comfortably alongside traditional numbers like "Jesus On the Mainline." Although the Moondoggies came together as high school mates and are only now in their early 20s, they chronicle life's big tensions. "It's time I start changing," Murphy says on "Changing." That's easy enough for a person to sing; harder to express is the admission that follows: "But I don't feel like changing. Lord knows I need changing." The Moondoggies' struggles as a band are universal: finding transport to the next gig, nailing an intro to a new song, successfully balancing the rock life with family life. Often as not, they seem to work things out with some harmony.

Sean Nelson

There's a reason that the diagram of the "\$5 Cover: Seattle" world places Sean Nelson smack in the center of everything. Nelson and his amazing curly hair pervade the Seattle music scene. The rest of the world knows him as the gifted wordsmith and frontman for Harvey Danger. In the Emerald City, we love him dearly for that, but have also crossed paths with Sean in his roles as a music writer for *The Stranger* alt-weekly newspaper, a host of KEXP's "Audioasis" local music show, an editor for Microsoft. His bottomless rock history appreciation seeps into "You're Right," a conversational song about two people embracing their widely diverging views: "You're probably right about the Rolling Stones," Nelson sings, "how they were never the same after Brian Jones." (He then asks for the concession that the post-Jones *Sticky Fingers* is the Stones' best album.) That ability to take the longer view is apt for veteran of Seattle's grunge years, a musician whose played over the past decade with Death Cab for Cutie, the Long

Winters, the Decemberists, Nada Surf and the Minus 5. He may not always be comfortable with the role, but Sean Nelson is indeed an elder statesman of the modern Seattle scene.

The Spits

All punk, all the time. Sounds about right for a band with song titles like “Rip Up the Streets,” “Eyesore City” and “Wouldn’t Wanna Be Ya.” The Spits definitely rock a retro vibe, conjuring early ‘80s punk and new wave with snappy, snotty songs perfect for spilling your beer to. Guitarist Sean Wood’s sleeveless jean jacket with “The Spits” scrawled across the back seals the deal. There’s also some 1950s sci-fi love at work in the Spits world. Witness the robots and flying saucers that adorn their releases! Thrill to the sounds of “Space Guitar”: “I’m not afraid of the FBI,” Wood declares. “I’ve got a guitar from the sky!” And it’s clear that drummer Lance Phelps is part automaton, because no human can pound the kit with such industrial speed and precision. Just listen to the albums – all of which, by the way, are called *The Spits*. Think of it as a uniform: punk rock, jean jackets, robots, *The Spits*. They wear it well.

Tea Cozies

Tea Cozies’ song “Pretty Pages” surges forward on two guitars. One wails like a police siren zooming down a nighttime boulevard. The other sounds fastidious, like a typewriter tapping out notes instead of letters. The indie rock band has a knack for juxtaposition, be it with twin guitars or taking the familiar – say, television, or, on “Pretty Pages,” vanity – and exploding it into the monumental with addictive melodies and seductive vocals. Tea Cozies formed in late 2005 around the core of singer/guitarist Jessi Reed, keyboardist/guitarist/singer Brady Harvey and drummer Kelly Viergutz. Bass player Jeff Anderson is the band’s only male member. In 2008, they issued a self-titled EP, but the following year is when the city truly took note of Tea Cozies’ talent with their debut album, *Hot Probs*. The disc’s “Like Luca Brasi” is a head-spinner of a short story, in which a playful, bouncy tune hides the tale of kids at a swimming hole and singer afraid of diving. “Since we made the trip on down here, I went ahead,” Reed sings “went ahead – and ended up drowning.” It’s not your average summertime jingle. But damn if Tea Cozies don’t make you wanna sing along just the same.

Thee Emergency

Back in the early 1960’s, before grunge, before Heart, before Hendrix, there was an energetic noise called the “Original Northwest Sound.” Seattle music historian Peter Blecha puts the recipe this way: rocking R&B packed with big riffs, grunting saxes, electric organ and blistering guitar. The four housemates known as Thee Emergency keep the flame burning for that original wild sound. Soul drips from every cut on their most recent album, *Solid* (2008). “Call 911” is a breakneck call to the dance floor. Who else opens – *opens* – a song with a minute-and-a-half drum solo? No navel-gazing here, folks, just a whole lotta hip-shaking. When Dita Vox (vocals), Matt “Sonic” Smith (guitar), Nick Detroit (bass) and Tom T. Drummer (drums) bring their build-and-release energy explosion to the club stage, even the iciest scenesters have trouble maintaining their too-cool-to-rock stances. But don’t misjudge the band a one-trick pony. On “I Need No One To Be Home,” Thee Emergency ply a melancholy tune (complete with fiddle and brass) that could find a home in the best country-western juke joint. As Vox laments her lonely state, the band lends soothing, warm backing vocals. That’s Thee Emergency ideal, both within the band and with the audience. Everybody gather ‘round, ‘cause we’re gonna rock, we’re gonna cry, and we’re for sure gonna do it all together.

Thee Satisfaction

While the outside world has occasionally recognized Seattle rappers (hello, Sir Mix-A-Lot), Seattle hip-hop has largely stepped to its own beat. The scene looks very familiar, though, in its domination by male MCs. Enter Thee Satisfaction. Perhaps it’s fitting that the region that gave birth to Riot Grrl punk would put forth a duo like Stas and Cat: feminist, activist, empowering. Stasia Irons and Catherine Harris-White

are partners in life, as well as on stage. And while the national scene might not be ready for gay women MCs, Seattle has embraced Thee Satisfaction. "I'm happy to feel accepted by the hip-hop community here in Seattle," Irons told *The Stranger*. "It's a lot more positive than I thought it would be." Of course, much of that acceptance has to do with Thee Satisfaction's music. "Waltz," from the self-released *Snow Motion* (2009), is a woozy dance track on which the duo intends to "shake what my mama gave me." But on "PTSD," they want to know, "No Child Left Behind? What about my whole tribe?" None of which even touches on Thee Satisfaction's claim to be from outer space, or their career rise from an Eritrean restaurant. But those will have to be topics for another day.

Weekend

Weekend are the quintessential side project in a city where countless bands spawn two or three offshoots. Ryann Donnelly first made her name with the horror rock band Schoolyard Heroes. As frontwoman for that outfit, she belts lines like, "Take off your skin and dance with me/ Cut out your tongue and sing for me." By contrast, in Weekend, Donnelly comes across as an all-American PTA leader. Well, a PTA leader who speaks French and doesn't mind kissing off her partner to sultry disco strains. "Miss me more than I care," she promises on "Big. Black. Big. City." "I'm gonna hurt you more than ever before." Donnelly's collaborator is beatmaker Mark Gajadhar, also known as DJ Gajamagic from "\$5 Cover: Seattle" group Champagne Champagne, and onetime drummer for extreme punks the Blood Brothers. Weekend sounds like none of the bands on its members' resumes. The duo would be right at home, in fact, opening a show for Madonna. With Gajadhar's sparse tracks behind her, Donnelly trades the scary for the seductive. She's perfectly comfortable saying goodbye to a lover, and knows where to lay blame. "You're not a good man – you had a good time," she clarifies. An offshoot, yes, but one with the potential for deep roots.

Whiskey Tango

Whiskey Tango, 12 years in existence, have outlasted the Beatles. Sure, you've heard of the Fab Four, and may have never heard of the punks in Whiskey Tango. But it says something about the Northwest music scene that Whiskey Tango has slogged it out lo these many years on tiny club stages, in cramped, sweaty vans, and across two albums and four EPs. A lot of people out here make music for the sheer pleasure and accomplishment of it, whether or not anyone else takes notice. Whiskey Tango – including Ian LeSage from GOD on vocals and lead guitar, Michael Loftus on vocals and bass, Sean Donovan on drums and most recently Lucas Matkins on keyboards – originally formed in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1997. Five years later, they headed south to thrash out their hardcore sounds in Seattle. Songs like "Supersonic Rodan" owe a debt to the ferocity of hardcore pioneers Minor Threat. On the recent self-deprecatingly-titled release, *From Nowhere to Nowhere Else* (2009), Whiskey Tango adds piano and harmonica without polishing their trademark grit. "Even Punkers Get the Blues" sums up the past decade with genuinely touching fortitude. "It's been a long and winding road," they sing. "Keep on just keepin' on with hope."