



Buttercup

Texas-based band Buttercup’s newest work, *Grand Marais*, is an experiment in minimalism. It is composed of previously unreleased songs recorded over the course of three days in early 2014. These recordings were kept buried in the Buttercup vault because, at the time, they were deemed by the band as “painfully raw.” It was a collection of songs, recorded quickly, that detailed the loss of both Erik Sanden’s (vocals, guitar, keyboards) and Joe Reyes’s (guitar, vocals) fathers and the depressions that followed in the mid-2010s. And bass player Odie, being a sympathetic soul, also embraced this expression of grief through music.

It’s weird that now, years later, the songs seem appropriate for this strange time that we all find ourselves in, after the pandemic and tumult we’ve all experienced. Using only an acoustic guitar and bass as the sole instrumentation, the record highlights the lyrical message even more and showcases their gifts as arrangers. The drums and bass aren’t missed. Now, after eight years of waiting, these songs will finally see the light of day on July 14, 2023.

The record’s name comes from a small town in northern Minnesota, just a few miles from the border of Canada, where Sanden spent much time with his grandparents. The phrase *grand marais* means “large swamp,” which feels like an appropriate title for the nostalgic, murky lyrical content of the songs.

“Erik had begun sketching out the songs that would become this album, and he thought that we could arrange the songs so no drummer would be necessary,” says Reyes. “Odie played a huge part in the arranging process; paring down songs to their bare minimum is his specialty.” Odie concurs regarding the minimal instrumentation: “All of us sing, so we used our voices like keyboards or guitars to flesh out the songs. It’s better fleshy.” Sanden explains, “There is an infectious playfulness lurking right under the surface of these songs.”

Producer Danny Reisch added psychedelic washes of echoes and reverbs, but the foundational sounds all solely come from acoustic guitar, electric bass, and voice. It is this minimal palate that helps give the recording a directness that is sometimes lost in larger, fuller productions. Reisch was the perfect producer for this project and recently was nominated for an Oscar for his work on the soundtrack to *The Green Night* (2021). “Danny brought another compelling layer of sounds and textures that flesh out each song perfectly,” says Reyes. “His receptiveness and excitement about the album’s concept helped keep the energy level high for each session.”

Ultimately, the vibe evokes anti-folk bands like the Violent Femmes or the Pogues. The record is in many ways the most punk thing that Buttercup has made—raw, plaintive, and often quite loud—in spite of being essentially an acoustic recording.

Perhaps the most poignant picture of the struggle comes in one of the album’s singles, “Morrissey for Company,” which offers a ridiculous conceit: stricken soul seeking relief by obsessively and incessantly listening only to Morrissey for the duration of a whole year. Pro tip: it doesn’t help. “He’s *not* good company,” jokes Sanden. And “Let it Drop,” lyrically, is a single sentence (not a run-on) about literally crying into one’s beer with extreme accuracy.

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But not all of the songs relate to personal grief. Based on true events, “Opening Band” is a thought experiment that asks: what is it like to be an opening band tasked with warming up a very large, very



impatient crowd for a famous band? The honest answer is: a mixed bag. While soul-killing at the time, these shows draw a band closer together. They make bands better. And later, in the forgiving glow of memory, they become precious moments.

“Opening Band” truly benefits from the minimal production—though the musical bed is just a single acoustic and electric bass, the song sounds huge. The sparseness enhances the song’s vulnerability. It evokes the bravery of bands like The White Stripes or solo artists like Elliott Smith, who enter the arena with so very little to hide behind.

Sanden says, “Buttercup has had its share of beat-downs, but even when a gig was a train-wreck, we always felt the joy of being able to go down together, singing in unison like the band on the Titanic.”

Reyes adds, “When you’ve been in a band for two decades, not every show will be perfect, especially during tough times. Luckily, we have a great group of dedicated fans. We haven’t been heckled in a long, long time, but if it does happen, at least we can deal with it together.”

Their fans are so loyal that they have been nicknamed the Buttercult.

Said Buttercult fans had to wait for, well, years, to hear *Grand Marais*. The album sat shelved for almost a decade, for reasons beyond the heavy subject matter. Why? Sanden explains: “Right after that album was finished, we had a chance to record another album—*Battle of Flowers*—with our friends Emilio III and Diego Navaira, whose father, Tejano legend Emilio Navaira, worked with Joe in the early ’90s. They’re incredible musicians, so we jumped at the chance to work with them. That album was mixed by another great producer/engineer—and *Tape-Op Magazine* founder—Larry Crane, whose credits include Elliott Smith, Death Cab for Cutie, and Pavement. But this opportunity, which drew to a close when Sting asked the Navairas to open his world tour, also meant withholding the *Grand Marais* LP until a later date.”

Formed in 2004, Buttercup, has written hundreds of original songs that NPR calls “jangly art rock for the left side of the brain.” The band has released four full-length records, four EPs, and a DVD documentary. For over two decades in South Texas, the quietly dedicated band has produced music and art that creates a sound tailored to the conflicts they’ve had, the losses they’ve suffered, and the joy that exists between each member as their lives are distilled down and brought to the listener—created and performed in a city better known for its tacos and basketball team.

The members continue to be the best of friends. Sanden functions largely as a frontman. He is playful, literate, and his humor tends towards the absurd. Reyes is famous for his unwavering smile, generous nature, and his Grammy Award-winning guitar playing (Freddy Fender). Odie, a Texas treasure, brings unconventional voicings, deep sartorial sense, and rock-and-roll animal power, both to the bass and to his cooking; he has been known to craft high-quality sandwiches on stage. Drummer Claire Rousay is the latest member to officially join the band. She was recently featured in the *New York Times* for her emo-ambient solo work and has garnered glowing reviews from *Pitchfork* and others. She brings a subtle and hyper-musical approach to the drums that fits beautifully with Buttercup’s emo-optimistic aesthetic and is the backbone of 2022’s *Specks: An Autobiographical Record*.

The band has attracted a collective of talented musicians that at times join them for recordings and tours, like John Dufilho (Apples in Stereo, The Deathray Davies) and Jason Garner (The Polyphonic

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Spree). On the touring front, Buttercup is more than a little quirky and more than a little mischievous. The band’s live show blends visual art, performance art, and installation. For example, they often take “phone calls” from a red rotary phone that has been rigged to function as a microphone. These on-stage “conversations” add drama and levity to ongoing narratives. The band once staged a live talk show with

celebrity guests and comedic interviews. That night, they handled a snake on stage. A signature piece, “Audience of One”—where individual audience members are led into a back room, all by their lonesome, and therapeutically prescribed songs depending on their specific musical needs—is a fan favorite. Once the band played a “daybreaker” show at 7 a.m. at a dive bar, to a packed and caffeinated house. In recent years, they delivered a mobile art-rock show in the bowels of an historic theater, collaborated with a classical orchestra twice, and collaborated with multi-media artist Chris Sauter on two award-winning pieces for Luminaria that showed in Berlin and Budapest.

It’s these kinds of atypical, buzz-creating shows that have led their fans to expect the unexpected. Longtime Texas-based music journalist Richard Skanse explained it thusly: “To the delight of their longtime loyal fanbase and first-timers alike, just about every Buttercup performance is akin to an interactive art show, packed with as many fresh, fun—and often outright joyfully absurd—surprises as memorable songs and moments of impeccable musicianship.”

We suspect all who listen will be pleasantly surprised by the unexpected content and fresh approach of *Grand Marais*.

<https://www.wearebuttercup.com/>

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