

Performance: Love Songs

Love Songs Heat up the Night on Valentine's

Story and photo by Dan Abbott

Smoke is already pouring from beneath my car's hood when we get to the Mission District in San Francisco. The temperature gauge tells me to stop, slow down, turn back, anything but try to take this hill. I pat the dashboard in a comforting motion and circle around for a parking space of questionable legality.

There is no turning back. Somewhere in this tangle of bunched apartments, there is a party going on, and a band is about to heat up an already unseasonably warm February night. If it were a normal party, with amplified rock bands and breaking glass, it would be easy to find. But tonight, Alameda's own **Love Songs** is playing a special acoustic set, simultaneously appeasing neighbors and confounding fans.

After 15 minutes of searching (I lost the address), my companions and I follow a group of friendly hipsters to an unassuming door. Up a strange and winding staircase we climb, through a labyrinthine apartment decorated with paper hearts, and down another flight of stairs to a hidden basement. There, the four sharply-dressed young men of **Love Songs** are getting ready to play.

They take their time tuning acoustic guitars as the basement becomes crowded. When they finally begin, it is with the voice of Craigums, as he is known, turning the air blue with an operatic *capella* number far too obscene to print here. The others chime in and out sporadically, emphasizing Craigums' sincere delivery.

Suddenly the music explodes into an intricate flamenco ballad, which then ascends into a full power-pop song, with soaring backup vocals and stadium-rock guitar harmonies. And somehow this morphs into the theme from "Popeye the Sailor."

Craigums holds his guitar up in a classic pose, thrusting his pelvis at my friend amorously while he plays. "I've got really good breath right now," he grins.

"Turn up the guitar," someone quips from the audience.

"Stand closer," Craigums shoots back immediately. And everyone does. Even without their normal amplification, **Love Songs** is a hilarious, confusing, and fist-pumpingly rockin' band.

The band formed in 1999, when Craigums asked friend and ex-band mate Brad (none of them seem to have last names) to play drums on a recording project he was working on. A veteran of such seminal East Bay punk rock outfits as **Your Mother** and **All You Can Eat**, Craigums' initial **Love Songs** cassette was eventually released by New Disorder Records in 2001.

In a music scene where bands are quickly locked into a genre, **Love Songs** jolts the audience out of its comfort zone. With esoteric potty humor, streams of non sequiturs and sophisticated, spastic rock, the band charms audiences of all shapes and sizes. It is truly startling to see a room full of kids alternately rocking out and falling down with laughter.

"Often times I think people are confused as to what to do when they see us," Brad says. "I see lots of smiles and I'd say an equal number of raised eyebrows at our shows. Thankfully the smiles and laughs are outnumbering the eyebrows as time progresses."

Jack, who plays second guitar, agrees. "Hopefully all eyebrows will be removed to eliminate Bradley's confusion." Three of the four members live in Alameda, though they hail from Pleasanton, Castro Valley, and Ohio. Living in



the East Bay, they say, has a big impact on what comes out of their amplifiers. "We grew up in very sterile, boring, middle-class suburban environments," Brad says. "What else was there to do but play music and be silly and do dumb suburban things?"

In some ways, it seems, they haven't quite gotten the hang of adulthood. On stage they are positively juvenile. Their costumes are outlandish and smutty, and during songs they bounce around like their high school age fans. Their lyrics are enough to get a kid in trouble, if his parents ever found their album.

"Pretty much all of our music is PG-13 or younger," bass player Seth says in defense. "The words, on the other hand, have yet to be rated."

During the entire show, and most of this interview, all four of them grinned constantly. They weren't the stoned grins you might expect from silly rockers. No, each member of the quartet grins as though they've just put itching powder in your socks. It's unsettling, to say the least.

As fun as the band is to see, they make you jealous, because it seems as though no audience

member could have as much fun as they do. Craigums admits this is no accident. Most of their antics are for their own benefit.

"We definitely spend an inordinate amount of time just trying to entertain ourselves," he says. "If you can play a song for the hundredth time and still find a way to make your band mates laugh, then that's refreshing."

Suddenly, confusion and hilarity break out. The hostess of the party, trying to raise gas money for **Love Songs**, has set up a kissing booth in a large cardboard heart in the backyard. The band poses for pictures in the giant heart, and then takes over operation of the kissing booth for themselves. Jack seems to be the crowd's favorite, selling his lips for a dollar a pop. This Valentine's Day is a little warmer than it ought to be, and at least some of the blame ought to lie with **Love Songs**.

Love Songs will be playing March 10 at 8 p.m. at 924 Gilman St. in Berkeley. Visit the Web site at www.the lovesongs.com or on Myspace at www.myspace.com/lovesongs. ④

Dan Abbott is an Alameda writer.

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