

In the liner notes to *The Silver Age*, Morning Spy's second full-length, there is a short biographical outline of Raymond Lully, a medieval Catalan poet and theologian, and inventor of what could arguably be called the first computer. Jim Gavin, the writer of the piece, explains how Lully used his newly devised silver-encased mechanical device to prove, "through cold and impenetrable logic, the sanctity of the Cross and the superintendence of the Holy Trinity." With his computer in hand, Lully hurried off to Tunis in 1315 to refute the Saracens. They stoned him to death.

Except perhaps for the casing of Lully's computer and the silver mentioned in the album's lyrics and title, any connection between this short sketch of the inventor's life and *The Silver Age* seems loose at best. But the similarities, real or perceived, between the poet-theologian and Morning Spy itself – a band that guitarist James Spadaro once said makes "semi-psychedelic indie rock for hipsters and bookworms" – might explain his rather odd inclusion. Like Lully, Jon Rooney, the band's principal songwriter, gives so much of his time over to philosophical and literary pursuits that it's become a running joke. And though none of the four members has ever met with a violent reaction to the band's chosen style of music, the unanimous praise Morning Spy would like to have has been slow in coming, not least of all in their hometown of San Francisco.

"There are a lot of great bands here," says Rooney, giving a rundown of what seems to be a healthy but competitive and compartmentalized local music scene. "There's a big American Gram Parsons strain of bands." And there are bands that fit into the "fashionable" post-punk Gang of Four category. And then there are the jam bands. "Nobody really sounds like early '90s Matador indie rock." Consequently Morning Spy finds itself alone among a large and noisy crowd – which would be especially advantageous if San Francisco audiences happened to prefer early '90s Matador indie rock. Instead the band often ends up fighting niche interests and fickle music trends while trying to overcome its anonymity.

"It's a really great scene because there are so many bands... but there are so *many* bands. It's somewhat proved an obstacle in that we're probably as well known most places as we are in our own city. But it's good in that it forced us to go outside of the city and not stay colloquial. We play here so much, but we've found that it's better to be *from* San Francisco than in San Francisco."

morning spy



Pen: Eric J. Iannelli
Lens: Charlie Villyard
Design: Royce Deans

Then again, for all but manufactured pop singers, these things take time, and Morning Spy is a relative newcomer. After forming in the summer of 2001 as a quiet and tentative recording project between Rooney and drummer Mark Loftin, the band's debut album *Subsequent Light* only appeared in early 2004 (by which time they had recruited Spadaro and guitarist/vocalist Allison Goffman through a Craigslist posting) as a modest self-release. The *Two Horses* EP, which followed, sold quickly and earned the band more critical and popular acclaim. Yet that EP had the dubious benefit of being a restricted limited edition run, making it akin to circulating your business card among your existing customers.

Since the release of *The Silver Age* earlier this year, the band has seen a significant surge in interest in its own brand of guitar-based pop. This was helped no doubt by a joint issue with the Arizona-based label Keep Recordings (the other partner being Rooney's own Abandoned Love label) and nationwide distribution through Revolver, all of which helped them attain a higher profile. But the more likely factor was the stronger overall songwriting – richer melodies, catchier choruses – coupled with a boost in collective and individual self-confidence. Most noticeably, Rooney seems to have settled into a distinctive vocal style, a sharp Lou Reed-inspired drawl. His lyrics have become more substantial, too, making deliberate use of poetic devices and technique.

"I put a lot of work into them. I try to write as much as I can so it stands alone on the page, which is kind of hard to do," he says. "I'm not really super interested in telling real narratives. I'm not a storytelling songwriter. I'm much more interested in creating allusions and being a bit obscure. I end up reading a lot and I definitely write a lot as I read. *Our Noise* by Jeff Gomez – I wrote a lot of lyrics while reading that." Rooney's use of alliteration and unconventional rhyme schemes make the lyrics to songs such as "Princess Vancouver," "Voices and Vigils" and "In the Silver Age" stick in the listener's mind and help the music to do the same.

For *The Silver Age*, Rooney and his bandmates opted to revisit two songs from the *Two Horses* EP, the title track and "Ask Us to Dance;" but they were reluctant to steer too familiar a course. "When the band started, we tried to find a common ground – solid indie pop like Galaxie 500 and Yo La Tengo. In writing this record, in many ways I tried to reconcile a more avant approach with influences like Broken Social Scene, Destroyer, Arcade Fire, John Cale, Lou Reed solo stuff. We're a little bit all over the map. Motley Crue," he laughs, "we are not."

In keeping with the steady growth of audience and ambition, the tour in support of *The Silver Age* was one the biggest the band has undertaken so far. "Basically we went to Denver and back. There were nine cities on that leg and then two weekends ago we went to Portland (Oregon)," a city the band has hit before on West Coast tours. The biggest obstacle this time around wasn't in landing gigs but getting "everyone's schedule together." "No one I know can live off music," Rooney says. "We all have to have day jobs and it's really hard to get time off. We all work at software companies - there's plenty of that here. Still, next year we're hoping to do a larger tour."

Between now and next year's proposed tour, Rooney intends to concentrate on some of his own solo material and flesh out the songs he began on the recent Denver tour for the third Morning Spy album. "We're thinking about maybe doing something along the same lines [as *The Silver Age*] but potentially more rhythm-based, maybe looking away from the more bombastic stuff. That," he adds quickly, "is only at the conversational level."

Rooney also aims to build his Abandoned Love Records into a platform to support more struggling bands – bands like the ones he writes about on BlueMag.com, a small music-centric website where he goes simply by his last name. "I like to find bands that are small that people haven't heard of or that people have forgotten about. I tend to review bands that other people aren't paying attention to. At this point I spend most of my time thinking about music, and this has certainly been a great way to listen to things I would never otherwise have heard of. There are so many great bands. You'd be surprised by the quality of some of these self-released records." In addition to helping him to reflect on his own music and to improve it, Rooney says his moonlighting as a music critic gives other lesser-known bands an encouraging pat on the back. In his own way, he's trying to give the latter day Raymond Lullys – Morning Spy among them – a better chance to be heard.

"I think martyrdom is in the indie rock mentality," he says with a chuckle. "We've come up with anything as good as his silver computer."