

FUELING THE PHLUX CAPACITOR

By: Matthew Morris

Originally published in *IT Magazine*, May 2004

It had to have been ninety-five degrees in that room. The window fan wheezed in a trivial amount of fresh air like some pathetic joke. It was a room with sloped ceilings, a narrow staircase, and a view of the neighborhood treetops. Actually, the room was an attic, but many bands would kill to have had a rehearsal space like that in-house. It was a fully stocked studio right upstairs. A private rock room. I sat stoic while Phlux played on in the stagnant, sweaty heat of the first hot day of summer (which always catches everyone off guard in Maine). They were a well-oiled machine; a syncopation of pistons, valves, gears, and spark fueled on their own energy. The heat did not phase their performance. The guitar growled. The bass rumbled. The drums pounded. Voices rang out inside the music.

Their black van reads: "PHLUX: Rock & Roll..." It is an ambiguous description at best, alluding to Buddy Holly, Led Zeppelin, Bob Seger, Rancid, or any thing else that gets relegated into a miscellany. It leaves you asking questions, but even if you ask the members of Phlux you won't get a straight answer.

"Basic rock is the core of what we all really know and love," explained drummer Greg Angus. "We've all got some different shoot-offs of ...jazz and blues and punk. The core of it to me is just rock, and we have some other influences that just blossom out of it."

"Greg was a Nirvana and punk freak when we met him," said Cody Phipps, guitarist and part-time vocalist for Phlux. "I like a lot of blues and blues-tinged rock. I love Pantera, too. ...When I refer to 'rock n' roll' it just means *good music*. ...There are country songs that rock. ...You can find jazz that just rocks hardcore. That's true about every genre, so that's why 'rock n' roll' covers everything."

Bassist and main vocalist Clint Phipps speaks up at this point. "I think Miles Davis said it best when he said: 'There are two kinds of music. Good music, and the rest of it.' We try to play good music."

While I believe that a world-wide consensus of what qualifies as "good music" will never be reached, the power trio Phlux have their own mutual definition. As their website www.phlux.net reads: "*We grew up listening to the radio. We grew up watching a little MTV here and there. We grew up realizing that coherent songs were the ones that everyone remembered and liked, intelligent and poetic lyrics were what was passed on through the ages, and memorable melodies were what people hummed to keep the real world at bay.*" As with any band, their individual tastes make up a patchwork of style.

"We don't have any hard and fast rules about writing because there are so many ways that it changes," said Cody. "You can have a clear conception in your head of how you want the song to be ...and then bring it to the band and it's completely different. You hear things. People throw things in that just add to it in a way that you didn't even think."

"We all have completely different tastes. Our own different genres. When a song is brought to the band, we all put our own little twist on it," explained Greg. "Some things suck, and some things are good, and we try to weed out the things that suck!"

"It certainly sounds totally different after everyone gets their input," Clint agreed.

The diversity of input is very well documented in the music. From their upcoming CD release *X*, the song "Horseman" exemplifies a how Phlux's simultaneous mixing of genres becomes more than the sum of its parts. At 36 seconds in, Clint's funky slap/pull bass line locks horns with a slightly Dave Mustaine guitar riff by Cody. While another drummer would be happy to hammer away in 4/4 time, listen carefully and you'll hear Greg tapping in triplet patterns on the ride cymbal while keeping the rest of his drum kit busy. By the time you are in the groove with this song, the funk happens. Literally. Phlux breaks it down into a different genre and back again for the finish. "Song X" flies the rock flag high with heavy power chords and a head-bobbing stop/start rhythm. Some harmonics and digital pitch bending by Cody's guitar effects are a moody contribution to the quieter parts of the song.

X will be self-produced album for 2004, as was their previous release *The Negative Album* (1999). Blasting Zone Productions is Phlux's own label and production company. It is an object lesson for any band trying to pay their way without big money from big record labels. Recording, touring, and promotion all sprout from Blasting Zone Productions, boasting a staff of six people (including Cody and Clint).

"I went to business school specifically for promoting and learning about all the tools of making a band work," explained Cody. He motions to his brother, Clint. "He went to law school for the same reason. So a business degree and a law degree with the idea of promoting music independently is really what we are doing here."

"The band is really behind the front of the innocent looking book store, you know?" Clint drew an analogy from the 1960's *Batman* TV show. "We are actually interested in the whole thing. Recording and promoting..."

"Trying to find an alternate way around the recording industry behemoth," Cody summarized for Clint. "Barriers to entry: it's hard to play a one-thousand seat venue if you don't have enough audience. There's the Catch-22 that you can't get the audience without radio play, you can't get radio play without getting payola, you can't afford the payola without a recording contract... so how do you do it? You watch five or ten great bands in two years time, that could have been regionally if not nationally successful... and then... (snaps his fingers) gone. Why? ...Are you going to find a guy who's going to offer you a record contract in Portland, Maine? Maybe, if you make some calls. If you have contacts. But you don't make the calls and you don't have someone from New York, Nashville, L.A. coming out to see you, then there's no way. ...There's no infrastructure for it."

"We really like being able to do what we want to do," Clint stated, turning the conversation away from the obstacles of the recording industry and on to the benefits of independent labels. "We don't have somebody saying: 'You have this image, do this.'"

Phlux has their plan in motion. With the upcoming release of *X* the band is firing up the Blasting Zone promotional engine. A 12 page color mailing booklet is being launched to venues from here to the west coast. It's a promotion for their "A Storm Between Ports" tour, which they plan to gig from Portland, ME to Portland, OR and back again. Included is a three song demo CD, band biography, graphical analysis of promotion results, and a suggested stage map for instrument placement. Contact info is listed on every page.

What is *your* band doing for promotion?

It is easy to call a band hip because they are obscure and no one knows about them. It is even easier to call them sell outs when they hit the big time FM radio station and start having T-shirts and panties sold at their shows. All too often scenesters love an underdog, but eventually they love to see that hero fail when they lose their local tangibility. Bands get jealous of each other. Is that because of an envy of talent? Rarely. It is because *Band A* is worked hard to be on the cover of a magazine and *Band B* is too busy being haters. Take it from Phlux: seven years is along time for a local band, or even a national one. They have yet to pitfall into musical trends, but remain popular enough to sustain a wide and diverse fan base. Best of all, they do it all their way.

Leaving Cody's house, I glanced back at the band van. "PHLUX: Rock & Roll..." After three hours with the band the tagline started to make sense, but only vaguely. Maybe that was the point; you could not sum up Phlux in three words. Or 1,400 words. Or a 12 page flyer.

Maybe they let the music do the talking.

For more info, visit: www.phlux.net or call 207-255-4049.