

# CELEBRITY PLAYGROUND

BY MICHAEL SHULMAN

## The New Days of Disco

*Panic at the Disco's Second Album Is More Pretty Than Odd*



Vegas-based Panic at the Disco makes music that has more in common with late-'60s-to-mid-'70s rock than with alt-punk. From left: Brendon Urie, Ryan Ross, Jon Walker and Spencer Smith.

**T**he beginning of 2007 saw the members of YouTube darling Panic at the Disco—founder and chief songwriter/lyricist Ryan Ross (guitar, keyboard, backing vocals), co-founder Spencer Smith (drums), frontman Brendon Urie (lead vocals, guitar, keyboard) and Jon Walker (bass guitar, keyboard, backing vocals)—taking time off from their furious touring schedule to start writing songs for a follow-up album to their double-platinum debut, 2005's *A Fever You Can't Sweat Out*. Around mid-year, though, they decided to scrap everything they had written and start again. Armed with a stack of entirely new songs and a new producer, Rob Mathes, the band was off to lay down the tracks that would become *Pretty. Odd*. The majority of these were recorded at Las Vegas' Studio at the Palms, with the orchestral arrangements done at London's historic Abbey Road.

"At first we worried that it was going to be too distracting at the Palms, but then they took such good care of us that we just set it up and made it our own," says Ross. "We never had to leave, which meant we could focus on making the record without any interruptions—definitely the coolest difference between recording the first album and the second."

The first thing that is apparent upon hearing

*Pretty. Odd*. is the direction the tone of both the lyrics and music has taken in comparison to the first album, which they recorded while in high school. In the case of Panic at the Disco, where so many of the songs (Ross' especially) are autobiographical, it's pretty easy to connect the dots. These guys are having fun and they're obviously happy, and the result is reflected in their music. When it's pointed out to Ross that the lyrics of "When the Day Met the Night" (with its Scheherazadian imagery) would lead one to believe that he's actually happy, he laughs and answers in the affirmative. When pressed as to whether love has finally found Ryan Ross, the response is, "Yes, thank God."

Make no mistake about it: This is still rock 'n' roll. It just has more in common with late-'60s-to-mid-'70s rock than with most of today's alt-punk. Still, though, *Pretty. Odd* is more in tune with today's musical psyche than one might believe

**These guys are having fun, and the result is reflected in their music.**

at first glance. Many major corporations are reaching out with national ad campaigns that feature rock. As a result, songs from bands such as Queen ("You're My Best Friend" for Carnival Cruise Lines), the Beatles ("Hello, Goodbye" for Target) and Electric Light Orchestra ("Mr. Blue Sky" for American Express Plum

# PANIC AT THE DISCO



Clockwise from left: Panic at the Disco's sophomore album is more of a collaborative effort by the band; "We could focus on making the record without any interruptions—definitely the coolest difference between recording the first album and the second," says Ross (second from right), with Smith, Urie and Walker during a session at the Studio at the Palms; cover for *Pretty Odd*.

cards) are in heavy rotation on televisions from coast to coast. And it is these bands that Panic at the Disco was drawn to while crafting *Pretty Odd*.

While it's easy to choose standout songs on *Pretty Odd*—"Do You Know What I'm Seeing" (with its Dylanesque harmonicas and troubadour style), "When the Day Met the Night" (bringing to mind Chicago's "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?" if covered by the Smiths), "Mad as Rabbits" (Wurlitzer electric piano backing a quirky melody and terrific harmonies) and "Pas de Cheval" (Smith licks his skins and tins like a rolling metronome of goodtime cheer)—it is most remarkable when taken as a whole. It has been quite some time since an album has come along that can be played from start to finish with nary the urge on behalf of the listener to fast-forward, and this is just a further testament to the band's abilities as writers, singers and musicians. Ross, Smith, Urie and Walker are also utterly unjaded, insightful and, if anything, still a bit in shock as to how far they've come in such a short time.

"To be honest, we're just a group of young guys who have a lot of fun doing what we do," says bassist Walker. "We don't have it all figured out, but we know what we like." Continues Ross, "We know we're doing our own thing. We're not trying to fill anyone's shoes." This could be the reason behind the universal acceptance and enjoyment of the band's music. It's like that great line from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*: "Oh, he's very popular, Ed. The sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, wastoids, dweebies, dickheads—they all adore him. They think he's a righteous dude"—except that for our purposes, the part of Ferris Bueller would be played by Panic at the Disco.

Internet chat rooms about Panic at the Disco are abuzz with everything from



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With Motion City Soundtrack,  
The Hush Sound and Phantom Planet  
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the dropping of the exclamation point in their name to the directional change the music and lyrics have taken. In their sophomore effort, the lyrics feature less agro urgency, while the music depends more on instruments—even using orchestral arrangements for horns and strings—than on computer programming. The album is also more of a collaborative effort by the band. The result? *Pretty Odd* is one hell of a composition.

When asked if there were any lyrical bells that he wished he could retrospectively un-ring, Ross replies: "Sure, but at the time it was stuff that was important for me to say. But we all got to that point where we didn't want to look back on anything with regret. You change as you get older; you just don't feel the same way toward certain things and people as you might once have." And this from a 21-year-old college dropout who writes like a modern-day Rumi, spouts Wildean witticisms off the top of his head, and whose biggest pet peeve is "disingenuousness" in others. His only desires after this tour are "to take some time and enjoy myself, then start working on our next album."

If that wasn't testament enough as to how much the members of Panic at the Disco enjoy each other's company, Smith really puts it into perspective when describing the band's post-tour routine: "We always take a few days off when we first get home, but then it's right

back to hanging out every day, and it's like we didn't just spend five months on a bus together. That's really what makes us such good friends, and it comes through on the new record."

As the most memorable rock bands of every decade have proven, good music and lyrics are enduring. Panic at the Disco's *Pretty Odd* leaves one aurally satiated yet eager to hear what their next album might bring. ♠