

## An afternoon with The Zolas in New York



*Canadian music is on somewhat of a high at the moment, our [guest blog](#) looks at one of the bands riding the wave, The Zolas...*

Enough about east coast [CanCon](#) darlings. There's **Feist**, whose '1-2-3-4' will never stop being synonymous with iPods. **Drake**, who Torontonians both love and hate, always referring to him as Jimmy from **Degrassi**, though secretly sharing his 'Headlines' music video every chance possible. And of course the plethora of indie folk and rock bands who are so humble, have brunch together and help each other record music in makeshift living room studios, adorned with white holiday lights.

**Adam Sternbergh's** The 6th Floor blog post 'Toronto Is Having a Seattle Moment' tells Toronto to own it away with being uncomfortable about making chart topping music.

But Vancouver based duo, **The Zolas**, proud west coasters, were in New York City mixing their upcoming full length album and wanted a piece of the music landscape. Vocalist and guitarist **Zachary Gray** and I sit down at their producer's midtown Manhattan recording studio, chat about the new record, his favourite writing spot and exchange familiar stories about missed connections.

I arrive a few minutes late for our 3 p.m. meeting, having gone to the same address, but on the east side instead. I spot Gray in the studio kitchen, cutting a citrus fruit. "Grapefruit," he says after I thought blood orange. His shoes are off and his socks match.

We find comfort in the hallway couch and I apologise for not knowing the entire catalogue of the band's history, another journalist taboo to add to the list that day.



"If this album is finished and we don't like it, this is it," Gray says from his end of the couch. I don't believe him and laugh at how dramatic he's being. "Guaranteed. We'll never play again and that's how it always is."

The Zolas last full-length album 'Tic Toc Tic', also their debut album, was released at the end of 2009. More recently, they released the single 'Cultured Man' on a split 7" with **The Liptonians**. In between, they toured all over Canada, worked on side projects and

in 2011 were nominated for a XM Verge Music Award in the 'Album of the Year' category.

**Tom Dobrzanski**, the man behind the piano and other half to The Zolas, was nominated for a Western Canadian Music Award for Producer of the Year.

Gray describes the band as fickle, at their best when they're simply doing things that are fun in the moment. A new album wasn't happening without a deadline so with only five songs written, Gray booked a studio, found a producer, had a writing binge and now a tentative Spring 2012 release is imminent.

The Zolas identify as indie rockers making progressive rock, though perhaps best described as an eclectic mix of guitar, keys, catchy beats of synth and drums. Keys work in various styles rich chord sequences, beautiful melodies, ragtime saloon, cabaret yes, eccentric, but so wonderful...and endearing.

We brainstorm what that means, trying to find a similar sound and genre for comparison. I offer 90s meets **Joel Plaskett** meets **Two Doors Cinema Club**. Gray searches for words. This is indie rock for people who are sick of indie rock.

Drinking a yogurt in the fashion of a beverage, Dobrzanski joins the discussion about categorizing their music. Samples of their new songs leak into the hallway from underneath the studio door. The yogurt drinking distracts me, and he asks if I'd like one, but I pass up the chance for a probiotic fix.

"The new album sounds more like **Radiohead** than anything we've done before, but still not that much," Gray says.

That could be part of collaborating, too, Dobrzanski adds. No one can drive home a single influence.

**Grizzly Bear** and **TV on the Radio** are recent music selects, though Radiohead will forever be Gray's favourite band.

The process of writing for Gray is quite exhilarating. He simultaneously feels inadequacy and triumph. It's described as a rollercoaster ride, where the first few days are lacklustre at best. You sort of descend into this pit of despair. Then on the fourth day every

single time you write, its the best ever. Thats the kind of conceit you get to and you hover between the two.

Songs written by Gray are mostly about girls. His unfortunate missed connection on the six train during this trip is the perfect empirical inspiration. Anecdotally, he reveals one of his favourite writing spots: a spot at the University of British Columbia library, where hes written some of his most beloved material.

After tangential discussions about the definition of viscosity and New York pizza, we move into the studio so I can listen to samples from the new album.

Gray and Dobrzanski sit in separate swivel chairs under spot lights tracked above the audio board. Did the vocal seem to land for you? Gray asks at the end of the first song. Dobrzanski cues up the next song. They reassure each other, but also talk slight adjustments. Bopping to each beat and looking off into the distance, ears concentrating on the music theyve made, The Zolas were in their element.

This is what Gray meant when he said it was all or nothing, each and every time. I believe him now. The care they had for each song, mentally parsing through arrangement and element, was a perfectionist at work, or perhaps just a band that really loves making tunes.

When I fall in love with something, all I want to do is be in a field and spin around, says Gray.

I just want to ride the bus and press my cheek up against the humid window pane and I just want to look at the smears of life. Those are the two extremes and I want to be taken to those two extremes.