

Order Up: Double Cheddar Burgers, Longstanding Rivalries, and Wisconsin Built's Rest Less

by BRENDON HERTZ on Apr 11, 2012 · 12:22 pm

1 Comment



Baseball season is upon us as an early spring air blowing through the half-cracked door to our left has sparked us with the possibility of some kind of awakening tonight, but then someone decides to start singing rap songs from the corner booth. It's only one of many contradictory events of the evening. I'm talking with duo Eric Christiansen and Thom Fountain of [Wisconsin Built](#) late at night just before the release show of their new album, *Rest Less*, this Thursday at the House of Rock. "Is that Fifty?" Eric Christiansen asks about the tune hummed across the table, referring to rapper 50 Cent. "No," someone responds, "It's Rough Riders!" "Oh," Eric replies, slyly adding, "that was, like, their one hit then?"

This comment sets the tone for the evening. Eric seems like the type of person who likes to get his witty two-cents in, but he often sits back to let Thom do the serious talking. On the surface, Thom and Eric look contradictory themselves. Eric is tall, has longer, curly hair, and rests wise-looking glasses on his nose. He looks more likely to be in an Indie-type band than Thom, whose hair is cut fairly short and who usually sports a fairly "put-together" look. We ease into the conversation: Herbie Hancock and the origin of bass clarinets in popular music (Wisconsin Built will have a clarinetist joining them on stage Thursday), the band 30 Seconds to Mars, and topping-less pizzas. It's clear through these conversations that Eric and Thom have a unique relationship as band mates; even though they've only been playing together since 2010, it seems that they could talk about pretty much anything while keeping a rapport with their audience at the time, be it at the bar or on stage. I imagine them on stage the night of the show, and ask what I should expect.

"It's going to be a little different," Eric says of the release show on Thursday, referring to having extra instrumentation added for the occasion. Drummer Davy Sumner will also be joining Wisconsin Built for some songs, but Wisconsin Built is no stranger to a supporting cast. The band originally began with Brian Johnson, Matt Wagner, and Eric. Thom came an instant later (he claims he missed the first practice), adding bass or drums at times, but has since settled in at the kit. The band has had Sumner play with them before, but they seem content staying a duo. "I feel like Eric and I are on the same page for the most part. It's really easy for us to knock out songs [together]," says Thom.

It's somewhat ironic that Thom and Eric have such a seemingly tight-knit friendship with one another. It's easy to see that they have a lot in common, but they both come from different backgrounds. Thom came from a military family that traveled a lot throughout his life; he was born in the Netherlands, and also lived in New York for a while before coming to Eau Claire (Thom would be angry if I didn't mention his family is from Green Bay originally). Eric, on the other hand, is from near the Green Bay Area. Both Thom and Eric love the Packers, but that might be where their sports allegiances divide. Baseball season has just started, and Eric roots for the Milwaukee Brewers, while Thom sets his sights high for the Chicago Cubs. When I ask them if this causes any friction in the dynamic of the band, they laugh, but they also seem to get sufficiently riled up about the rivalry in a short burst of heated conversation. It's clearly this dynamic of humor and a little bit of "fight" that makes the pair work well together as a band.



The next day, I meet the band at Culver's for a quick meal and custard. It's one of their favorite restaurants, enough to give it a thank you in the liner notes of the album. We choose a corner booth, where Thom and Eric claim many of the Wisconsin Built band meetings have been held ("99% of the time, we're here, in this booth, eating," jokes Thom). We talk about their new album, some of their local influences, and, prodding the sports rivalry once more, Cubs versus Brewers.

Thom and Eric both agree that one of the things they like about the album is its versatility between songs, and the importance of that in relation to a good live sound. "There's a lot more movement in it. The bigger parts can be much bigger, and they can be these really full, rock song kinds of things, and that makes the much quieter, really simple organ stuff a lot more poignant," Thom states. Eric concurs jumping in with, "We just didn't want to do a thing that was always going to be the same." The band speaks of the album as something much more than songs—it is an entity to them: something that has a future beyond just what has been recorded. They are also proud of the fact that the album is a cohesive unit, not just separate songs creating an album. "The goal behind the whole thing was to make it blend together so it's one—it's a whole package," Eric notes. However, Thom says he has a favorite song on the album. "I really like 'Home,'" says Thom. "That song really sets the tone for the album. It works well [with the rest of the songs]." Both Eric and Thom have strong ties to Wisconsin and Eau Claire, and this comes through during the course of the interview.

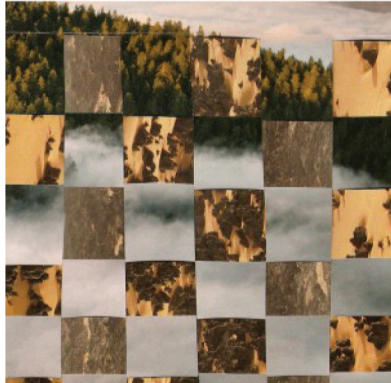
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Brian Moen and Laarks are cited as being some of the band's influences. Thom starts to gush about Brian as if Brian were a big brother. "He's a really great drummer. He's a really great designer. It's like, just stop, man! Stop making us all look bad." Eric agrees, saying that the band really seems to have it together sound-wise. They also say they're influenced by The Daredevil Christopher Wright and, more directly, Mbro. Thom used to live with Mbro's drummer and learned a great deal from him as a musician.

When I ask how Thom became a Cubs fan, Eric responds, while smiling, "It comes with being the worst person." He's half-joking, but Thom gets serious fast. He explains that his mom was a baseball fan, and, with the family moving "around every year or two," WGN was the only network that was everywhere and broadcast all 162 Cubs games. He goes on to explain how he got to listen to famed announcer Harry Caray and has been a fan ever since. "The Cubs aren't even a factor," retorts Eric about the rivalry. "There's not even anything to worry about." Despite their differing standpoints on baseball, you can be assured that this won't affect their music, their professionalism as musicians, or the release of their album.



Rest Less will be released for digital download and on vinyl record as well. When asked about why they chose to put the record out on vinyl and support this particular format, both Eric and Thom's responses reveal that they are more than just musicians; they consider many aspects of being in a band beyond the music. Eric starts in after a short pause, "The only time someone wants to be tactile and *put on* something, it's going to be a record."



"There's this whole aesthetic value that comes more with a vinyl than a cd," agrees Thom. His face starts to get serious. "I can think of a lot of album art on cds that, as soon as I look at it, I'm kind of like, 'Man, I wish this was on vinyl, because this [artwork] would look really cool blown up, twelve by twelve, and with the way the printing works; it's usually this high gloss thing.'" "And, the packaging is more pleasing," Eric adds. If anyone else said this, it would probably sound pretentious, but Eric pulls it off with his very laid-back tone. Thom continues on, explaining why the record is important to the band as well. "It's this put together thing where you fill in the blanks and get it made. It's up to you. We had the fold-overs printed at one place, we got the jackets from another place, and we're doing the inserts ourselves. So, we're putting it all together ourselves, and there's just this nice feeling about it."

After sitting down with these guys for a few hours, I am happy to say that I also have a nice feeling about putting the next Eau Claire album release in the hands of these two. Wisconsin Built certainly lives up to its name; the members of the band are both humble and unique, they're funny and friendly, and they're willing to share their well-crafted stories through the music they create and otherwise. They adore the Packers whole-heartedly, they love a good double cheddar burger, and they say "home" with a Midwestern accent and a smile on their faces. Ultimately, it's a rare thing to be able to sit down with two people who seem so comfortable with one another and, at the same time, are able to push one another towards new avenues. This is evident in Eric and Thom's musical stylings as well as their conversations with others, and it is why this particular writer is looking forward to a homespun Wisconsin Built Thursday night.

-Brendon Hertz, April 2012











Wisconsin Built's release show for *Rest Less* is this Thursday, April 12th at House of Rock. 10pm + Free – Adelyn Rose and Dexter Wolfe to play in support.

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