

Band & Performer Archive

Articles from past issues

Current Issue

Headlines

Lancaster Edition

Table of Contents
Feature Story
Bar/Club Calendar
Dining/Restaurants

York Edition

Table of Contents
Feature Story
Bar/Club Calendar
Dining/Restaurants

Harrisburg Edition

Table of Contents
Feature Story
Bar/Club Calendar
Dining/Restaurants

General Editorial

Movie Previews
Concert Listings
Live Theatre Listings

Article Archives

Dining/Restaurants
Bands/Performers

Feedback

Survey Question
Letter to the Editor
Employee of the Month

About Us

General Info
Editorial Info
Advertising Info
Contact Info

Links

Bands/Performers
Area Venues



Sonic Lux

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Story: Ellen Barley

Photo: Steve Stoltzfus

"Drat!" I left my purse in Trey's house. Of course it was raining as I dashed back to the front door. When I opened it, I was floored by a smokin' guitar riff. "Where on earth is that coming from?" I gaped. "I was just here, like, two seconds ago." I moved towards the sound, which seemed to get louder with each step. Then I saw it. There, on the kitchen table, was Trey Alexander's cell phone. It was ringing Greg Howe ... An hour and a half earlier, en route to Alexander's place for an interview, my Cherokee's radio was set on scan. I admit this is dangerous, and predictably, I heard nothing from guitar legend Greg Howe. Instead, I was asked a question that no one should have to answer: "What cha' gon' do with all that junk, all that junk inside your trunk?" I cringed. "Lovely lady lumps" was no Sonic Lux - guitarist Trey Alexander's band - and it was a jarring juxtaposition to my morning of indulging in their stellar sound.

Sonic Lux's music defies genre, with equal parts progressive rock, jam band, funk and rock and roll. Aptly, the name itself is rather elusive. During our chat, once the pre-interview niceties are complete, drummer Woody Campbell is happy to shed some light on the subject. He explains with characteristic intensity that "Sonic Lux" derives from the Latin for "Let there be light." "We wanted what would represent the music," Campbell emphasizes. So, if Sonic Lux deigns to offer light through music, it would stand to reason that the band members themselves are enlightened. I test my theory.

Tossing out my Sonic Lux/bad radio experience, I wait for the customary barbs piercing the black heart of the music industry, the scourge of commercialization, the evils of pre-packaged pop. Apparently, I would have been waiting for a long time. "I try to listen to everything," Alexander says softly, flipping back his long, smooth hair. "If a person loves what they're doing, if they love and believe in it ..." He leaves the obvious conclusion to me. I begin to feel jaded for having raised the issue. Where was the bitterness? The angst? The rebel yell? But the members all agree on a question of their own: Why dwell on the negative?

In the acrimonious fog of progressive rock, perhaps this approach is a rebel yell. "Music has so much effect on society," Campbell insists, revealing the motive for the band's constructive agenda. The bandmates all firmly believe that their positive attitudes infuse their music - and inject their listeners with an uplifting booster shot to combat the perpetual downers of reality. This mindset is especially important in light of their intended audience. "We're

On-Line Archives

[Dining/Restaurants](#)

[Bands/Performers](#)

On-Line Articles

[Lancaster Feature Story](#)

[York Feature Story](#)

[Harrisburg Feature Story](#)

[Lancaster Dining](#)

[York Dining](#)

[Harrisburg Dining](#)

[Lancaster Club Calendar](#)

[York Club Calendar](#)

[Harrisburg Club Calendar](#)

[Area Concerts](#)

[Live Theatre Listings](#)

[Movie Previews](#)



pushing the next generation of music, trying to reach the youth," Alexander divulges. "This is why I teach so much." Alexander is a guitar instructor for about six hours per day. For another eight, he is a guitar player. But before he taught, before he helped start Sonic Lux, Alexander committed more time to practicing than to both of these endeavors put together.

"Trey was crazily compulsive," Campbell marvels, referring to Alexander's 16-hour-a-day habit. At the height of his intense regime, Alexander practiced until three or four in the morning - and then got ready for school at six, a scenario that eventually compelled his parents to pull him out of school completely.

Alexander seems unfazed by his unusual upbringing. "I was not a regular kid," he concedes freely. "I had no regular friends." Things changed when Alexander met Campbell and Hassan Ali, Sonic Lux's bassist/vocalist. This is not to imply that the two men are "regular;" they are both extraordinary musicians. In Campbell's estimation, they are both "extreme" personalities as well, he being the "crazy" one and Ali his "quirky creative" counterpoint.

Alexander admits that he was energized by being around these guys, who were having so much fun with life - maybe a bit too much, in Campbell's mind. "I was living the rock and roll lifestyle," Campbell remembers, "but then I came to the Trey Clinic!" Ali finally breaks his serene countenance, every line on his face crinkling as he produces a high-pitched laugh. Alexander joins in, but quickly gets serious: "To be a true musician, you have to be sober, you have to be straight." I look around the table at their three waters. "The generation before us," Alexander observes, "was a much tougher breed."

Bands like Led Zeppelin may have epitomized the rock and roll lifestyle, but they nonetheless bestowed a legacy of timeless and passionate music that Sonic Lux appreciates. The trio also cites Queen, Chick Corea and Steve Vai, but doesn't discount the more surprising inspirations of Prince, Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder. Each of the band members brings various influences to bear on the Sonic Lux sound. So how do they gel so superbly?

"Being in this band is like dating two women," Campbell answers somewhat cryptically. I am pretty sure he's not referring to Alexander's lovely locks or Ali's equally lovely eyes. After a chuckle, he clarifies: "You get used to fitting the mood of the other players." They all agree that their music straddles multiple genres, that it's stratified, but they simply accept this as part of the evolutionary process. Speaking up for one of the first times, Ali makes a compelling point: "You don't know what you are - someone else has to label you."

And if you ask Sonic Lux fans, that label would be "awesome."

The band fondly remembers one of its early shows at the Chameleon Club, claiming that it's hard to forget the first time people sing your songs and scream your name. Now, when Sonic Lux plays at the Symposium in Lancaster, singing and screaming may be all show-goers can do. With "totally gung ho fans," as Alexander describes the band's devotees, loyalty often equates to a packed house. One couple buys a CD every time they see Sonic Lux - the same CD. Now, those are what I call fans. Just what is it about Sonic Lux that yields such a frenetic response? Some might propose their exquisite balance between the melodic and technical, rendering songs impregnated with highly developed legato phrases, hybrid picking, eight-finger tapping and sweep arpeggios. Others may cite their emotive lyrics so masterfully executed by Ali. But if you ask Alexander, he's likely to say it's all about passion.

"As soon as you try to make music happen, it doesn't," he cautions.

Nonetheless, Sonic Lux is planning very concretely to make music happen when the band goes back to the studio to record its new CD, which the members predict will be finished within the year.

"We're putting our life into this album," Campbell stresses, looking

at me intently. From the vigorous nods of approval from Alexander and Ali, I gather he is speaking for all three. It will be less progressive than their previous demo and will feature songs that they've been honing for years. "We're not waiting for them to come and knock," says Alexander confidently, referring to the music industry.

Of course, waiting for something to happen has never been Alexander's style. And although he credits luck for having won the coveted title of Guitar Player Magazine's "Guitar Hero 2007," the 23-year-old prodigy definitely earned it. He competed in San Francisco against nine of the world's top guitar players, was judged by the likes of Steve Lukather and Joe Satriani, and still emerged on top. "I bawled like a baby when they announced it," he confesses, betraying his humble nature. "It was like a dream that I didn't wake up from." Affecting a more reverential tone, he explains that winning the contest was a way of reconnecting with his father, who before his untimely death when Alexander was still a teenager, prophesied that Alexander would be the greatest guitar player who ever lived. As the fledgling musician's biggest supporter, Alexander's father brought home his first guitar, booked all his gigs and listened to him play for hours on end. So, while Alexander was on stage in San Francisco, all he could think about was giving his all - and giving it all back to the man who got him there. Alexander says of the honor: "If nothing ever happened again, that would be enough."

But something did happen. Alexander was invigorated and more committed than ever to push himself to the limit. I thought that he might invoke his new acclaim to launch a virtuoso-performing career. His first thought? "How can I get Hassan and Woody, my best friends, to push through with me?" The answer, of course, is the new Sonic Lux album.

Then, Alexander brushes back his hair, smiles the most genuine smile I've seen in a long time and says of his bandmates: "This is where my heart sits."

Back in my car, I wiped the rain droplets off my glasses, breathed a deep breath and wondered if maybe the positive energy that Alexander, Campbell and Ali so readily emitted really had seeped into me.

I smiled contentedly, turned over the engine - and with it the radio. I recoiled. Then I remembered what Alexander had said. OK, I reasoned, maybe even Ludacris has something to offer, if he's passionate and all that ...