

Damon & Naomi The Earth Is Blue

Damon & Naomi.

Galaxie 500.

Exact Change.

Magic Hour.

Ghost.

20/20/20.

Everything listed can be tied in some way to Damon Krukowski and Naomi Yang, whose careers started with modest goals but grew to incorporate one of the most influential bands of the '80's, a much venerated publishing company, collaborations with some of the most talented rock musicians playing today and, most recently, the christening of their very own record label. Then again, one also can't forget Damon's side work as a published critic and poet, as well as Naomi's sublime graphic work and photography. The duo are artists in the most fully expressed sense of the word. With a new album, *The Earth Is Blue*, set for release in February of 2005, Damon & Naomi have chosen to take control of all aspects of their music and put the record out themselves. The album marks a new epoch in the wondrous world of Damon & Naomi, and is a stunning work to behold.

That world began when they were two-thirds of Galaxie 500, a Boston group who formed in 1987, which included Dean Wareham (Luna). A somnambulant answer to The Velvet Underground's looser moments, Galaxie 500 built simple songs out of relaxed chord progressions and standard rock song structures. And yet, they were a revelation. While the Pixies were across town playing immediate, skittish pop, Galaxie let their songs settle into your mind like hometown memories, developing and clasping hold while hardly seeming to be there at all. With three albums, all mentored by erratic producer genius Kramer and released on Rough Trade, the band's influence has been like their sound – wispy and ephemeral on the surface, yet solid and vast when seriously considered.

Dean's departure and the thereby immediate dissolution of the group is the stuff of rumor and legend, but needless to say, Damon & Naomi were presented with the first of many realizations that change is the seed of creative renewal. Having written a few tracks under the name of Pierre Etoile, the notion of continuing on and making two-thirds a new whole would seem to have been obvious. However, the dissolution of Galaxie had a deleterious effect on the duo considering a life in music, and their response was to throw their energy into a new publishing company. Exact Change boasts a list of authors so impressive, it's hard to believe only two people, whom most saw as the drummer and bass player in a *rock* band, are behind it. And yet, they have released the writings of Franz Kafka, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Antonin Artraud, Denton Welch, Fernando Pessoa, John Cage and numerous others. Exact Change has earned a reputation in the publishing industry as a top quality independent press, providing essential reissues of writing in beautifully designed books, and it's a pursuit they continue to this day.

If it wasn't for Kramer, Damon & Naomi may have given up music for good at that point. But at his insistence, they recorded *More Sad Hits* (1992). The record can be considered their *Low Life*, carrying traces of their last group while providing indications of where they were headed. There's a gentle intersection of rock ambience and folk gentleness on the album, an acute wariness against overfilling the spaces between the musical passages. While Kramer played a number of varied instruments on the album, he was careful not to embellish the sound to the point of losing that

dreamlike quality so powerful in the Galaxie recordings.

Faced with an overwhelmingly positive critical and audience reaction to the album, they took a left turn yet again, and joined up with Boston staples Kate Biggar and Wayne Rogers. Kate and Wayne, among many other things, now play as Major Stars and own the Twisted Village record store in Cambridge. The foursome devised Magic Hour in 1993, a group who prided themselves on intricate psych rock marathon tracks, one seven-inch release even fading out on Side A so Side B could pick up where the song left off. Magic Hour recorded three full-lengths over the next few years.

As Magic Hour ran its course, it was back to Damon & Naomi, especially after Kramer convinced them to organize a live show in exchange for traveling with him to Japan for a tour. While over there, they met the members of Ghost, a highly venerated psychedelic folk band whose orchestrated compositions are almost casual in their power and intensity. The shows were a huge success, both in terms of the size of these sold-out shows and the duo realizing the further potential behind continuing to produce music.

Soon enough, they were signed to Sub Pop, who released *The Wondrous World Of Damon & Naomi* in 1995 and *Playback Singers* in 1998. *With Ghost* in 2000, marked the first recorded collaboration between the band and their Japanese colleagues. Most of their live shows following that album included Michio Kurihara from Ghost, who continued his participation as a third member on *The Earth Is Blue*. One of the more gorgeous live shows was recorded in San Sebastian, Spain and released in 2002.

2004 proved to be a busy year for the duo. In addition to recording *The Earth Is Blue*, which took a year to complete, they oversaw the release of a two DVD set of Galaxie 500 videos and live performances, a Galaxie 500 rarities collection, and Damon's first book of poetry, *The Memory Theater Burned*. With so much experience earned and so many projects to oversee, it only made sense to take the full reigns for the first time in their musical careers and establish their own record label, and an amicable parting from Sub Pop soon followed. Their label, 20/20/20, is named after the seventies game *Careers*, where you are given sixty points to space out between three goals in life – Fame, Fortune and Happiness. Balancing yourself over a variety of interests provides the greatest opportunity for intellectual growth, doesn't it?

Nothing proves that more than *The Earth Is Blue*, their first album of new material in five years. Informed by their various experiences, both traveling the world and listening to and reading the greatest of human achievements, Damon & Naomi have created an album of worldly beauty and individual intimacy. The songs are smart and perceptive without forgoing a wide-eyed wonder at the many things there are to experience and learn. In addition to the contributions of Kurihara, trumpeter Greg Kelley and soprano saxophonist Bhub Rainey of Boston's nmperrign add some delicate brass.

"In my garden I'll raise my life as I like," Naomi sings on "House Of Glass". She and Damon have been doing just that for years now, and *The Earth Is Blue* is proof that you can achieve all you want, while still challenging yourself with the questions that you may never be able to answer. The goal lays in the challenge. As for the result, we can once again quote Naomi, this time from "The Robot Speaks":

"It's up to you what the image means."

PARTIAL DISCOGRAPHY:

Damon & Naomi

The Earth Is Blue (2005) – 20/20/20
Song to the Siren (live CD and tour movie DVD) (2002) – Sub Pop Records
Damon & Naomi with Ghost (2000) – Sub Pop Records (LP on Drag City)
Playback Singers (1998) – Sub Pop Records
Wondrous World of Damon & Naomi (1995) – Sub Pop Records
More Sad Hits (1992) – Shimmy Disc, reissued by Sub Pop Records 1997

Galaxie 500

Portable Galaxie 500 (greatest hits comp) (1998) – Rykodisc
Copenhagen (live, recorded in 1990)(1997) – Rykodisc
Galaxie 500 box set (4 CDs, three albums with CD of outtakes) (1996) – Rykodisc
This Is Our Music (1990)–Rough Trade, reissued by Rykodisc 1996
On Fire (1989) – Rough Trade, reissued by Rykodisc 1996
Today (1988) – Rough Trade, reissued by Rykodisc 1996

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