Scott McMicken and THE EVER-EXPANDING, *Shabang*

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Scott McMicken has always thrived on switching things up. As a founding member of Philadelphia rock mainstays Dr. Dog, McMicken and his bandmates consistently explored new sounds and new ways of writing songs across 10 gleefully eclectic albums before their 2021 hiatus. While McMicken has quietly released solo projects via cassette and vinyl on his own label Press On Records, for his latest effort, he’s done something he’s only done once before: started a band. With *Shabang*, out March 31, 2023, via ANTI-, comes the debut album from Scott McMicken and THE EVER-EXPANDING, and he’s made some of his freest and most adventurous music yet: a wonderfully collaborative collection of songs that feel lived in and true.

Part *Basement Tapes* and Paul Simon, and part a globetrotting foray into progressive sounds, *Shabang* is some of the most exploratory music of McMicken’s career. There are elements of jazz, dub reggae, country, and bossa nova throughout these 13 tracks, each exuding the excitement of being in a room with several other curious musicians. Opener “What About Now” originally started as a folk-rock dirge but when McMicken decided to add some bounce to the rhythm, the whole thing opened up. Even songs that dig deep into personal conflict like “Reconcile” radiate with a joy that’s tangible and rocking.

“I'm constantly trying at all costs to avoid feeling like a singer-songwriter,” says McMicken. “I would like to create a welcoming place that we can share rather than trying to yank you into my inner world.”

Over the past few years, McMicken has been building out his home studio operation, working on music and recording other artists like Big Thief for their album *Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe In You*. For most of 2021, he wrote and recorded a sizable batch of solo songs but no matter how much he tinkered with them, something felt off. “When you study how to make a good recording, inevitably, you land on the realization that it has so much to do with the performance,” says McMicken. “You can’t truly replicate the feel and the freedom of people playing music together in a room by doing everything yourself. There are no surprises, and there are no mysteries there.”

He sent the songs to Nick Kinsey, an engineer and producer with a home studio in upstate New York. “The two of us started talking and we got excited about the idea of putting together like a really large band,” says McMicken. “That way, we could really go aggressively in the direction that these recordings I had made lacked and make a full live sound.” Because McMicken’s previous band was composed of lifelong friends who over time developed an unbreakable musical bond, he decided to try something totally different: He told Kinsey to choose his future bandmates himself, selecting a group of total strangers who could collaborate on these songs.

Kinsey assembled every musician, with McMicken only asking for his longtime friend and collaborator Michael Nau to join the band, which also included Kinsey, Elizabeth Pupo-Walker, Neil Ochoa, Jared Samuel, Zach Tenorio, and Paul Castelluzzo. “I needed to go into it with as little control as possible,” says McMicken. “I just want to be in a room with wonderful people and encourage them to be themselves and be present to create nice musical moments.” As the band arrived at Kinsey’s studio, The Chicken Shack, McMicken decided to scrap most of the songs he’d painstakingly demoed to invite unshaken improvisation. “There’s something about being around strangers that just kind of holds the mirror up on you,” says McMicken. “I think there's a higher degree of accountability when you’re making music. You thrive within the limitations and awkwardness if you are really honed and you're intuitive.” Over a fruitful week, the band hashed out 13 songs.

One of the few tracks that came from McMicken’s demos is the lead single, “Another One.” Originally written during his tenure with Dr. Dog about getting out of writer’s block, the song takes on new meaning in this full-band context. On the kinetic and joyful track which boasts a buoyant groove and a horn section, McMicken sings, “Once the morning powers wake up / And the hours flower on / A moment's all we are to take up / And here comes another one.” When introducing a song to the band, McMicken preferred to encourage improvisation and freedom to have everyone’s idiosyncratic voices join together to make up the whole. “The last thing I'm going to do is walk in the room and say, ‘This is your part,’” he says, noting that one single, “Mountain Lion,” came from him saying, “Everybody just get going on G minor: I'm gonna sing about some animals.” Even the band name, THE EVER-EXPANDING, came from an extended early jam where the band found its first chemistry.

By being present and living with these musicians (quite literally: McMicken and Nau stayed in tents outside the studio) united under one common goal, *Shabang* is full of life and endlessly candid. “I knew nothing good will come of this unless I am totally free and away from any pressure and pretense,” says McMicken. “Such an incredible spectrum of emotion passed through me while making this album. There was this lightness and un-self seriousness. I feel like music and life cruises at that spot: everybody was so wholeheartedly invested and open.”

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