



WAXWING

1996-2005
{ The greatest band you never heard }

Waxwing was a time and a place that didn't exist together often, but when they did, they were so much more than just a band. This is our tribute. This is our thank you.

—
By Justin Luczejko

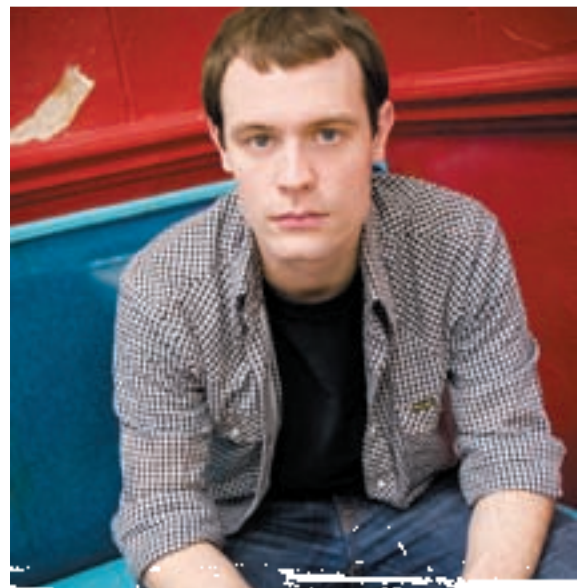
[All Photos by Christopher Nelson unless otherwise noted]



ROCKY VOTOLATO

PEELING BACK THE LAYERS

By Justin Luczejko



[Photo by Justin Luczejko]

Although his band Waxwing survived around three years longer than Rocky Votolato has been putting out solo records, casual fans rarely associate the punk rock-folky singer/songwriter with the clenched teethed, sincere and honest lyricist who fronted the Seattle post-hard-core band that broke up this past December.

Correlations between Votolato's lyrics in Waxwing and those of his solo project have largely ceased over the years, but can be discovered by peeling back the layers. They are now tucked underneath, subtly. Like many others, Votolato has found ways to simplify the matters in his life,

a way to cope with the more difficult aspects of the world we all live in. He cracked open an entirely new way of writing and in doing so, attained new personal and professional heights. "In the earlier stuff, I was trying to cope with my life through music," explains Votolato. "Then I started to get to a point where not doing that all the time helped me focus on what makes a good song."

Underneath the surface of the majority of Votolato's solo offerings lies the pain of a past left behind, tempered by the magic of a beautiful family and a burning bright future. He explains the first line of his newest album, *Makers*, is

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Within a road trip lives a nostalgia so pure and refined that nothing can match its sentiment. The typical effects of nostalgia grab us through videos or photographs of Christmas mornings when we were young. Road trips are different though. The nostalgia of a road trip doesn't just live in the past; it lives in the present as well as the future.

I've only been on one short-lived tour with a band, along with a two-week cross-country solo tour by myself. The most memorable road trips have been those occasional, short 20-hour trips with friends. Nostalgia blends into the conversations, the ridiculous experiences, and the memories that live on infinitely through the music. Yes, the music. The soundtrack to the trip itself always becomes a permanent marker that stakes its place forever in time, etched upon the soul whenever those songs play again in a separate place and time.

I was first introduced to Waxwing while I

was on the road, staring out the window of a passenger seat at 6 am as the sun came up over the mountains of Salt Lake City. As the publisher of a magazine and record label owner there is nothing greater to me than discovering a band that blows me away to such an extent that I immediately have to find a record store in an unfamiliar city just to buy every one of their records the store has in stock. This was seven years ago, and that defining moment of discovery replays itself anytime I hear Waxwing.

Fast-forward to 2006, Jeff Meyers, *Wonka Vision* Music Editor and I were sitting around the office listening to the oldest Votolato brother, Sonny Votolato's new solo record and thought to check in on Waxwing. We were shocked to see the band was deciding to call it quits before ever doing an East Coast tour. My favorite band was breaking up and I wouldn't get to see them play live.

It was raining that day and things were slow around the office. I was utterly depressed. Wax-

I'm Gonna Start From The Beginning. I'm Gonna Make Something Out Of Nothing.

—ROCKY VOTOLATO, FROM: "DON'T WALK OUT ON ME"

emblematic of a new outlook. "Please, slow it down," he sings and confides that he craves this serenity. "That's definitely what I'm talking about, that sentiment of please give me some kind of simplicity with all the bullshit that I'm dealing with," says Votolato over dinner at Taco Del Mar. The taco shop that Rocky worked at throughout college. Less than an hour remains before the final time he and his brother, Cody, will perform the songs he wrote for Waxwing almost nine years ago to the day. Endearingly, Votolato admits he's nervous. It's been a long nine years.

Times seemed rocky there for a certain period of Votolato's life, but from the turbulence came

an ultimate blessing. "I met my wife and two weeks later she was pregnant. I knew I was going to spend the rest of my life with her as soon as I met her," explains Votolato. "I tell people I married April because she had a bigger record collection than mine." Most might find this hasty, but to Votolato it felt right. "I brought her home to my mom and said, 'Hey, this is my new girlfriend, and this is her kid. She's pregnant and she's moving into my bedroom,'" jokes Votolato.

Votolato was in college at the time and had his life all planned out—he was going to graduate and tour with Waxwing indefinitely. "When I got my wife pregnant and we had my son, I

took responsibility for it," says Votolato. Without secure financial backing, a terrified Votolato broke down, but quickly recovered. "It turned into the best thing that ever happened to me. I have no regrets; I wouldn't change a single thing."

It's evident when talking to Votolato he follows the punk rock ethos with his life and his music. "I just want to make something that's meaningful, something that matters," describes the singer. He's disinterested in becoming an overnight flash-in-the-pan folk-rock star, but if he does one day sell tons of records like these "put them in water

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Waxwing would be playing two last shows in their hometown of Seattle a week before Christmas on December 16 and 17. Jeff suggested we go see them. The shows were to take place at the Vera Project [which *Wonka Vision* covered as part of our DIY venue feature in Issue #29] and the Old Firehouse where Waxwing played their very first show.

From that moment forward we made it our mission to get out to Seattle to see the band play their final two shows and document the entire occasion. With the support of Barsuk Records and Second Nature Recordings, Stephanie, Jeff, and I booked a flight out of Philadelphia and headed to Seattle to spend the weekend with Waxwing members Rocky and Cody Votolato, along with their older brother Sonny, and the rest of the guys in Waxwing. *Wonka Vision* Managing Editor Jason Schreurs also booked a trip to come down from Victoria, Canada and meet us there. We were embarking on something extremely important.

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I KNOW IT'S ALMOST OVER, BUT I DON'T WANT TO JUST FORGET IT.

—ROCKY VOTOLATO

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[Above: Left to Right - Cody, Rocky, Sonny]

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and watch them grow" pseudo-punk bands, it will be because he truly earned it. "I don't write trendy shit at all. I'm in it for the long run," boasts Votolato. "I would like to have a career that resembles Tom Waits or Elvis Costello, how it grew slowly over a period of time."

A true family man, Rocky is the father to his daughter Autumn, 13, and his "little bean," son Kienan, 6, who wears the same cowboy boots as his dad. At Waxwing's final show, Kienan sat in the back at the merch table helping to sell records. He played his Gameboy most of the time but said afterwards he really enjoyed the show and wanted a drum set from Santa for Christmas.

"Eventually the goal is to take the kids out on the road with us," says Votolato with a huge smile. It's apparent he dreams about this often. Like any self-employed, independent musician, the trick is to find the balance between doing too much and making sure he's there for the people he loves. Votolato wrote both Suicide Medicine and Makers on the road so he could treasure his free time at home with his children. "I just feel lucky. I know that's not something everyone gets to have."

His luck doesn't end there. In 2004, April was selected as the grand prize winner on

Home Team, a local Seattle cable show that builds a new first home for young families with an interesting and impressive story. The catch? The home makeover is a total surprise for the candidate; in this case, April. Votolato recounts that after four long days of furnishing the new house he and the Home Team concocted a story about driving to West Seattle to drop off the master tapes for Suicide Medicine at the studio. "She showed up and was completely overwhelmed!" he says of April's initial shock. "When she saw the rest of our family there, she started crying. Financially, it was huge for us. They paid our \$2,000 a month mortgage for one full year and now we own the house."

A beautiful family and a tremendous solo record would be enough for most people, but a brand new house thrown in for good measure...that's more than just dumb luck. Staying true to one's self, coupled with hard work, is the key to Rocky Votolato's present success. And by the looks of things, this dedication all but ensures he is going to be around for a mighty long time. **I**

For more info, go to: rockyvotolato.com



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The Waxwing family tree is both extensive and complicated. Over the past few years the majority of the band members have individually made a successful impact on the music world. Waxwing singer and lead guitarist Rocky Votolato has been touring heavily in support of his solo career and was just recently snatched up by Seattle's Barsuk Records [Death Cab, Rilo Kiley, Nada Surf, Mates of State and more] to release his seventh solo record. A recent sonic feature on the *The O.C.* is a small example of just how far his career has come.

Rocky's younger brother and Waxwing's second guitarist, Cody Votolato, has been wreaking havoc on the world as guitarist for the politically motivated, dueling-vocals, spazzcore band The Blood Brothers. Waxwing drummer, Rudy Gadjadar, will be on tour for the first half of 2006 with Starting Line and Portugal the Man, and then continuing his drumming position in Gatsby's American Dream. Rudy's

brother Mark, who wasn't in Waxwing, is the drummer for The Blood Brothers. Rocky and Cody's older brother, Sonny, is a solo artist and plays in Slender Means; he's also been one of Waxwing's biggest supporters over the years. Andrew Hartley played bass for Waxwing and over the course of the three days we spent with the band only muttered one thing, "I'm just the bass player." Waxwing's roots and branches are so complicated that Rocky drew us up an actual family tree too a bit too complex for us to understand..

The Votolato Brothers attribute their interest in instruments to their Uncle David, who would play Beatles and Bob Dylan songs at family functions. Coming from a musical family of six boys myself, I'm always intrigued whenever talking to brothers who are involved in one another's musical projects. The aspect of knowing how to push one another's buttons is way more prevalent and a lot of times can turn out to be disastrous.

[Cody and Rocky]



BARSAK RECORDS

By D.J. Short



The most exciting recent development for the Votolato family is the addition of Rocky to the Barsuk Records roster. Votolato is one of a number of artists—alongside Mates of State, Viva Voce, and Starlight Mints—that were added to the Seattle label in late 2005. The man behind Votolato's signing is Barsuk co-owner Josh Rosenfeld.

Rosenfeld was initially intrigued by some early recordings that would eventually be released as Makers this past January. "Well, I always thought he was a pretty talented songwriter," says Rosenfeld. "I actually wasn't super familiar with Waxwing, when I met him, I knew him more from his solo records."

Votolato recorded Makers with fellow Seattle musician Casey Fobert (ex-Pedro the Lion, Seldom) at Fobert's home studio. The low-key pace allowed Votolato to record his most ambitious record to date. For Rosenfeld, the appeal was clear upon first listen.

"The way his singing has changed really grabbed me at first," says Rosenfeld. "His singing is less in the red than it has been in the past.

Rocky's record is a pretty traditional sounding record and he's writing songs that have pretty traditional idioms. I just think that his lyrics and the way he puts songs together melodically is extraordinary."

Now officially a full-time singer/songwriter, Votolato once had to delicately balance a day job with a wife, family, and his music. With brother Cody's inclusion on "Where We Left Off," as well as the recent final Waxwing shows in Seattle/Redmond, it didn't take Rosenfeld long to realize any Votolato project is a family affair.

"Well I've met them pretty recently through Rocky. Actually, I've ended up meeting a lot of the Votolato family," laughs Rosenfeld. "They've got a big family and they're all such sweethearts,

all of them. They just love music. I mean, you would think 'Cody, he's in The Blood Brothers, he's probably some punk rock guy,' but there he is singing along to one of the songs by The Band. It seems like they just have a nice family vibe going."

This fits into a larger scope for Barsuk, as Rosenfeld insists on only getting behind music his label sincerely loves.

"We don't want to put out any music that we don't like, but we also particularly don't want to work with people who are dicks," says Rosenfeld between chuckles. "So we've been pretty fortunate." ■

For more info, go to: www.barsuk.com

I JUST THINK THAT HIS LYRICS
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TOGETHER MELODICALLY
IS EXTRAORDINARY.

—BARSAK CO-OWNER JOSH ROSENFELD

"Rocky tried to kick me out [of Waxwing] one time," says Cody. Rocky recounts a story where a member of The Blood Brothers accidentally shattered a window in his car, which Rocky attempted to fix using band money from the show. Cody refused, saying Rocky had been "righteous" about the issue. Petulant bickering aside, the fact that the Votolato brothers can recall past stories with astounding minutia speaks to the close bond they share. "For the most part, we have always gotten along," says Cody. Rocky

music together," asserts Cody confidently.

Waxwing formed in November of 1996, with Cody joining in late 1997. In their nine-year existence, the band eschewed typical trappings, such as a booking agent or a tour manager, and completed three tours... total. All of them were small and never made it as far as the east coast, with Detroit being the furthest they strayed from Seattle. "The first night of the first Waxwing tour, we played to a room with only the sound person in it," recounts Rocky, seemingly embarrassed

shows, the band said they felt a little rusty at the Vera Project show on Friday night. Rocky busted his lip on the microphone, completely lost his voice by the time the encore came around, and Andrew "the bass player" seemed just as removed on stage as he was in person. There was, however, something meaningfully mysterious about him. Rocky's wife, April, sold merch in the back and their son, Kienan, jammed along while playing his Gameboy. Adding to the adorable family scene was Mama Votolato, sing-

I THINK WE'LL ALWAYS PLAY MUSIC TOGETHER.

—CODY VOTOLATO

agrees, "Any issues we had were few and far between. If we would have toured, we probably would have had more fights." Cody says the three brothers have even considered starting a new band together. "I think we'll always play

to even remember the scene. "After about the second song, she got up and left."

More telling is that they played only three shows in the past five years. Having held only three rehearsals previous to their two farewell

ing along to her sons' songs; their stepfather helped Cody carry out the amps after the show. Sonny, the oldest of the Votolato boys, watched Waxwing's set with pride and told us

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SONNY VOTOLATO

IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN MUSIC

By Jason Schreurs



It's an awkward moment during an interview with Sonny Votolato, oldest of the three Votolato brothers. As we talk about his guitar and vocal work in Seattle band Slender Means and his solo project, BCRP (Blue Checkered Record Player), as well as his past bands such as Fields of Mars and Bugs in Amber, it becomes apparent I'm not too familiar with his music.

More accurately, I've heard a couple of Slender Means songs, never heard his solo project, and only vaguely remember his old bands.

"My solo stuff is melancholy, and acoustic, and orchestral in a sense. I've never been content to play music that's an easy listen... I guess any questions you might have about [the solo project] would make it easier for me to explain," Sonny laughs nervously.

He pauses, then continues, "[The solo project] is something I've wanted to do for a really long time and when I began Bugs in Amber, way back

in the day, it was more of an acoustic project, so this is back to the root of what I had in mind."

Aside from his lush solo work, there's Sonny's smooth, swaggering indie rock band, Slender Means, who were asked to join the final two Waxwing shows. Does the fact his two younger brothers, Rocky and Cody, asked his band to play these shows point to a common thread weaving itself through music of the Votolatos?

"I'm not sure," ponders Sonny. "We don't really play up our names or let anyone know [about the family connection], and that just goes back to wanting the music to have its own ground to stand on."

Luckily, I'm not a Sonny novice for long, and I spend my whole trip home listening to a mitt-full of CDs he hands me after the interview. The silky rock of Slender Means and Sonny's ambitious, atmospheric solo work affects me even more after having spent the weekend with him and his family, getting to know him over a short period of time. I'm reminded of how much music is shaped by the people creating and surrounding it.

In this case, it's the creative output of a 31-year-old stay-at-home father of four, the older brother of two other prominent figures in the



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how rare it was that the three of them were in the same place at the same time. "I know it's almost over, but I don't want to just forget it," admitted Rocky.

The Old Firehouse is truly the most unique non-profit venue I've ever experienced and the drive into Redmond, Washington from Seattle was breathtaking. Built and funded by township grants, the Old Firehouse is owned by the community and operated by volunteers. With an amazing sound system, multiple performance areas, and a highly affordable recording studio, it was like a paradise for fledgling bands and veterans alike. Community spaces flourished—lounges with couches spilled over into a billiards room, and weekly cooking classes were advertised in the neatly kept kitchen. Amazing venues like this are needed cross-country; they give the kids a comfortable, safe place to hang out and learn.

Being in the same venue that Waxwing played their first show in made the event very

special. This final show was the most intense yet. There were old flyers all over the walls that served as a hall of fame for the band. Nostalgic smiles were evident as the band members scanned these walls full of Jawbreaker and Sicko flyers. At the end of their set that night, Waxwing's instruments—metaphors used in a positive way to release the past all bottled up inside—sounded off the music to "There Will Be a Reckoning" one final time. As the chord progression and drums rang out you could see the emotion spill out onto the stage; it was not only a song, but the story of Rocky and Cody's lives. From across the stage with teeth grinding, I could see Cody fighting back what looked to be tears of finality, moving on with one's life as he watched his older brother scream his lyrics at the top of his lungs. The stark realization of just how big and important this moment was palatable to the band and audience members alike. This was looking into the mirror for the final time and seeing the past, and this was letting



[Andrew and Rudy]

Seattle underground music scene. Sonny is flattered by the attention on his family, but remains humble and somewhat guarded. "I think it's cool, it makes us feel appreciated in a sense," he says. "It's nice that someone somewhere else is interested."

When the subject of his family comes up again at his mom's house, where a gathering of friends and family members celebrate the passing of Waxwing, Sonny turns to me and almost pleads, "Can't we just let music be music?"

I look around the room at all of these people, connected to each other by a small group of heartfelt bands like Slender Means, gathering in celebration of music that has and will continue to fuel a tight-knit, honest music scene. And one thought keeps running through my head.

This is about the people who make the music, not the music that makes the people. And we can't just let music be music. It's about so much more than that. ■

For more info on Blue Checkered Record Player, go to: bcrpmusic.com

For more info on Slender Means, go to: slendermeans.com

SECOND NATURE RECORDINGS

By D.J. Short

It's a pretty safe bet a good part of whatever success the Votolato brothers have experienced thus far is indebted to Second Nature Recordings. Second Nature is the project of Dan Askew by way of Kansas City, Missouri. His discovery of Rocky and family came not from an mp3 or a CD-R, but instead the old fashioned way—listening to the record player. Askew's introduction came courtesy of Jake Snider (Minus the Bear) who recorded *Lying on Loot*.

"He told me that *Lying on Loot* was this guy Rocky Votolato and that he also plays in a band called Waxwing," says Askew. "Jake made me a tape of Rocky's songs, plus the would-be Waxwing 7-inch that he was releasing on his Henry's Finest Recordings. I instantly fell in love and listened to that tape a lot over the course of the next year or so."

Askew's initial contact about working with the Votolato brothers would not come until later, however. "Second Nature was sort of at a crossroads," says Askew. "The bands we were working with, Coalesce and Grade, were outgrowing the label and moving on to bigger ones and I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I had still been in touch with Jake

and by that time he had quit doing his label so I asked him what Waxwing was up to. Rocky was having a baby, going to school and working, but those guys are so passionate about music they made time to make it happen."

And so came *For Madmen Only*, released in 1999. In the years that followed, Cody's other band, The Blood Brothers, would release a series of albums under the Second Nature name and Rocky would begin to record solo material. After a 2002 release, *Nobody Can Take What Everybody Owns*, Waxwing began to lay dormant.

"Before there was always that hope that they'd do another record," says Askew. "I tried to convince them to do one last record before splitting up, but they just don't have the time."

Despite the dissolution of Waxwing, Askew intends on keeping their records in print in order to keep the band's legacy alive. "There were times I would put my own cash into making sure these records saw the light of day," adds Askew. "I always really believed in them and still do. They're amazing musicians and even more amazing people."

For more info, go to: secondnaturerecordings.com



that past go. It was time and they were in the middle of it. "It's all yours, boys," I thought to myself after taking a glance back at their mother watching from the back of the room.

The incredible show was well crafted and catchy, beautifully haunting and thought-provoking, a mixture of manic punk rock, post-hardcore, indie-rock with hints of folk and country sprinkled throughout. Rocky's lyrics, heavy-hitting at all times, dealt with subjects ranging from abuse, depression, death, and family problems, yet always resounded with hope. His raspy, almost throaty screams are fist-pumping, angst-filled manifestos. With utter honesty, Votolato spelled his tales out in his lyrical chimera, offering his listeners a chance at self-reflection without being too self-obsessed.

Later that night we stood in the Votolato family's living room, 3,000 miles away from our own home, playing with Rocky and April's dog, a little Boston Terrier named Soda Pop Curtis. The house had unexpectedly turned into a bit of

an unplanned wake of sorts. It was full of family, friends from the past, and old band members who came out to see the show and say goodbye. A 12-year-old bottle of Jameson was the first to be opened in celebration of Waxwing's end. We were truly made to feel like friends sharing in a very important moment, and not just journalists covering a story. "It's really sad, but also really cool to have real closure to it," said Cody. "We aren't breaking up mad at each other. I don't really feel like there were boundaries on us. We could have done something different if we wanted."

My music "biz" friends don't understand why Waxwing is *Wonka Vision's* cover story this issue. They would respond with incredulous queries about how the magazine would, or wouldn't, sell. If selling magazines were what this magazine was about, rest assured Waxwing, a now-defunct band who never toured across the US, wouldn't be on our cover. It's homage to a band whose

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CODY VOTOLATO BONDED BY BLOOD

By Jason Schreurs

Those who have known Cody Votolato since his Waxwing days usually think of him as the youngest Votolato, baby brother of Rocky and Sonny. But most music fans now know him as a different kind of brother—guitarist for spazz-freaks The Blood Brothers.

During a down period for Waxwing in the early 2000s, Votolato's buzzsaw art-punk "side-project" got an offer they couldn't refuse from a notable producer. The rest is history.

"At the time Rocky was gonna have a kid and The Blood Brothers were just going to school, not taking the band too serious," remembers Cody, "and then we got an offer to record a record with Ross Robinson. The stipulation of that was we'll quit our jobs and school and do the band. We felt like this was an opportunity we might never get again, so we took it and we did it."

The Blood Brothers had only been in the studio sporadically before the Robinson deal, but the recording session which would result in the landmark *Burn, Piano Island, Burn* lasted over two months. From there, they went on a touring tear that left some members of the band in a fog, including Cody. "I definitely

look at the past three or four years of my life sometimes and I don't really know where they went," says Cody. "We've done tours I don't even remember doing."

While Waxwing stayed humble and focused on the Pacific Northwest scene, The Blood Brothers have done larger tours and festivals. Cody sometimes misses the intimacy of smaller shows, something he rediscovered during Waxwing's two final shows, but doesn't begrudge The Blood Brothers' popularity. "It's kinda turned into a different thing with us," he says. "Sometimes the shows feel like a concert. But that's cool, too. I just want kids to go and see music."

The writing process in Cody's main band is also different from the relationship he had with his older brother, Rocky, in Waxwing. Rocky and Cody would write complete songs for Waxwing that would connect with each other seamlessly, but the elaborate collaboration of the brothers of blood is a wild smorgasbord of different sounds and ideas. "We'll just sit and have a jam session for a whole day and if anything was good out of it, we'll maybe make it into a song," explains Cody. "It's all over the radar. It encompasses all styles and there are no barriers."

Considering his two older brothers have solo projects, it's easy to wonder if Cody will branch out on his own some day. "I'm always writing music, but I haven't ever tried to do anything

really concrete with it," he says humbly. "Maybe I will one day. I've thought about it, but I just want to make sure I have songs that are good enough before I show them to anybody."

Or perhaps these solitary strummings will end up as new jam material for The Blood Brothers? "No, it's just stuff I sit in my room and play," he insists. "It's nice to just create music that's not for anyone but yourself. It's just really about making a song and a release of energy and emotion." ■

For more info, go to: thebloodbrothers.com



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ideals are in line with ours; a move to place passion, not business, at the forefront.

The difference between Waxwing and the hundreds of flash-in-the-pan bands who manage to sell 100,000 copies of a record after their first tour is it's nearly impossible to maintain musical morals in this day and age. It's hard to stay punk rock in the ethical and idealistic sense of the word. The only way to stay true to music is to completely destroy what you've started and move on. Bands like Refused and Operation Ivy, who are rooted at the center of punk rock, left us too soon but did so to leave us with the mark of an honest institution. Bands like At the Drive-In and Kid Dynamite left us knowing there'll be another band instilled with purified chaos to come down the pike again to show us something new. "Waxwing was kind of like trying to return the favor for what was done for me; the idea that music is able to save someone's life," says Rocky. "Maybe it's not designed to be mass-marketed. I don't

care. I never did. I wanted to have more freedom. I am a smart person. I know I could have been very successful with this band. I don't regret the way this was ending. That was my goal. To reach people where it would affect their lives."

The members of Waxwing recognize the band was a personal venture, a way of dealing with the world around them in a positive force. It's only a matter of time before they are recognized as a monumental institution, high at the top of the list of bands that simply weren't meant for this world. This is *Wonka Vision's* tribute to a band that truly mattered. They were someone's

son, someone's brother, someone's husband, and someone's father. They were a time and a place that didn't exist together often, but when they did, they were so much more than just a band. This is our tribute. This is our thank you. Waxwing's story is that of friendship and the plight of two brothers trying to find peace of mind. If they weren't able find it, and we hope they did, it's safe to say they sure helped a lot of people along their way. ■

For more info, go to: waxwingrock.com

