

POP MUSIC PREVIEW

# Of Montreal's Kevin Barnes: Naked and unafraid

By JAY GENTILE  
Special to the Tribune

He's performed wearing nothing but face paint and a pair of fishnet stockings. He's strutted out to greet the crowd while seated atop a live white horse, in what could be the only indie rock set ever performed on horseback. He's crucified himself onstage, not to mention the time he brought out Susan Sarandon to spank a man in a pig suit with a ruler.

But after more than a decade of masterminding one of the most consistently outlandish and unpredictable live shows in a generation (which might or might not have included pantomimed orgies and slow-motion sword fights), Of Montreal frontman Kevin Barnes has just shocked everyone by doing the unthinkable: making a normal album.

Normal, of course, is a relative term. Of Montreal's new album "Lousy With Sylvianbriar" does not bend the mind with the avant-garde classical compositions of the group's previous album, "Paralytic Stalks." It does not concoct the nightmarish R&B freak funk of 2010's "False Priest," nor the hedonistic electro-glam experimentation of 2007 concept album "Hissing Fauna, Are You the Destroyer?" "Sylvianbriar" is, for the most part, a straightforward American rock/country-tinged folk album. In fact, the weirdest thing about it could be its relative lack of weirdness.

We spoke with Barnes about his proclivity for nudity, his flamboyant alter ego Georgie Fruit, and the method behind Of Montreal's live show madness. The following is an edited tran-



PHOTO BY NINA BARNES

"Lousy With Sylvianbriar" is a relatively normal rock/country-tinged folk album from Of Montreal's Kevin Barnes.

script of that conversation.

**Q: In an act that many people would consider their greatest nightmare, you once performed nude onstage in Las Vegas and, in your recent video for "Fugitive Air," you again are briefly shown dancing naked. Where do ideas like these come from, and where do you find the courage to actually go through with it onstage?**

A: It doesn't really take that much courage. Maybe I'm a bit more of an exhibitionist or something, but it's

our natural state. So if you can just get over that hurdle, you know, the hurdle of breaking that taboo. ... I think it's actually very beneficial for people to stand naked in front of, you know, the world in a sense. I think it's something that we should all do. Not necessarily exposing ourselves to children or whatever, but to stand naked in front of your contemporaries, it's sort of humbling, in a good way.

**Q: You created the alter ego Georgie Fruit, a 40-year-old African-**

**American cross-dressing funk musician whose elaborate backstory includes multiple sex changes. Did you find the creation of this persona enabled you to perhaps do things onstage that Kevin Barnes could never do?**

A: I think so initially, yeah, where it was sort of a defense mechanism or something where I could go, "Oh, it wasn't me; it was this persona." Of course, it's always you anyways. There's no escaping. ... I think that initially it helped me as a device. And then I

shed that, and I don't need that anymore. I can still be extroverted and free onstage without feeling like I'm somebody else or something else.

**Q: Of Montreal's onstage antics are well documented. But from your perspective, what do you think is the craziest thing you've ever done onstage and are there any ideas you've had to scrap because they just were too crazy or wouldn't work?**

A: We have an idea, and we go for it. It doesn't mat-

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ter how dirty it is or how dangerous it is. But we've been sort of moving in a more abstract, visual direction with not as much physical theatrics. We did that tour where I was hung at one point from the galls and covered in shaving cream and — I just sort of like getting covered in weird stuff — and that was really fun. But as of late, we've been focusing more on just creating a visually dynamic and transportive and semi-psychedelic, visual experience for the audience. It's just a different approach.

**Q: You came out on stage a few years ago riding a white horse. Where did you find the horse, and how did that all come together?**

A: That was just one of those wild ideas that I had. And at that time period, we were basically just throwing every idea at the wall and just saying, "No idea is too crazy. Whatever idea it is, if it's interesting, let's go for it." And so that was one of those ideas. Our tour manager is a good friend of mine. I've been friends with him since we were children, basically. So I like giving him a challenge: like, "All right, find a white horse that we can bring on stage, work out all the logistics and make it happen."

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