



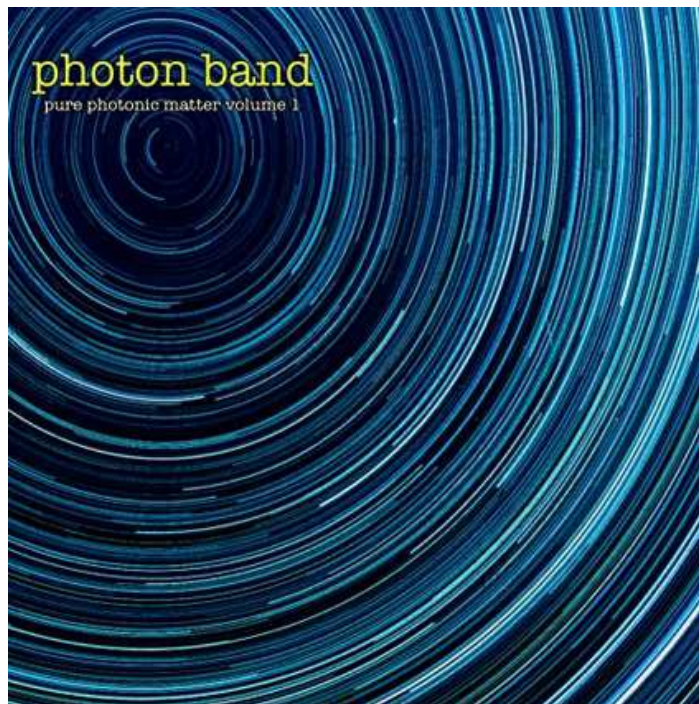
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Graded on a Curve: Photon Band, *Pure Photonic Matter (Volume 1)*

BY JOSEPH NEFF | JULY 10, 2013



When voices speak with fondness over the **Photon Band**, they are basically praising the musical efforts of one Art DiFuria. He's released a bunch of material under that name, and while the long-running project did have a fruitful actual "band" period, the largest portion comes right down to DiFuria's vision. The latest Photon Band LP is titled *Pure Photonic Matter (Volume 1)*, and while it's not the place for new listeners to start, it does hold enough positive energy that folks attuned to DiFuria's chosen style (namely, mildly psych-tinged pop-rock) should consider looking into its contents.

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The Photon Band released their first record way back in 1994, a 7-inch on the well-remembered Philadelphia label Compulsiv that coupled the songs "Superstar" and "Sitting on the Sunn." It was a fine hunk of noisily melodic indie rock with psychedelic touches that appeared during a real boom period for small but potent acts. In fact, records were hitting the racks with such speed that many worthwhile bands slipped right through the cracks. Thus, a whole bunch of promise unfortunately fizzled out before reaching its full potential.



Not so in this case and part of the reason is that the Photon Band's actuality as a band is only part of the whole scenario. Indeed, at this point their records are most succinctly described as the fruits of Philly multi-instrumentalist and songwriter Art DiFuria. It was during his membership in the very likeable '90s indie-shoegaze act Lilys that DiFuria first began messing around with his then side-project, and it eventually gained so much steam that he excused himself and committed his full creative energy to making records as the Photon Band.

On that first single, DiFuria was responsible for all the instrumentation, but it didn't really connect that way. From there additional releases including a pair of 7-inches and a CDEP for the Darla label "747 (Don't Worry)" ensued, with DiFuria bringing drummer Simon Nagle and bassist Jeff Tanner (who replaced early dude Gary Plowman) into the fold.

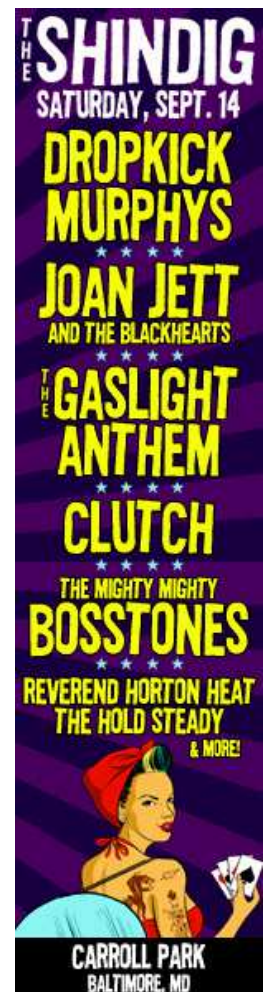
That Darla disc was less hard hitting than the debut, but the sometimes broken and at other moments anthemic country-rock of the title track remains a strong listen, and the two tracks that filled out the EP began essaying a recurring aspect of the Photon Band's personality, specifically a more classically rocking, less twee manifestation of Rob Schneider's hoo-hah under the banner of The Apples in Stereo.

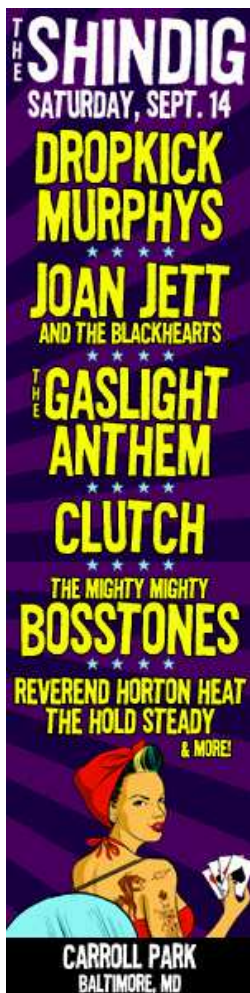
With the release of '98's full-length debut *All Young in the Soul*, the Photon Band started hitting their stride. That LP stands up pretty damned well (I just went back and checked), and due to the randy thrust of an actual band attacking a batch of hard-hitting nicely-penned '60s-derived pop-rock tunes in the Who-Beatles-Kinks-Nuggets vein, its relationship to Schneider's stuff had yet to become overly apparent. Comparisons were even made to Guided by Voices, but I've never found that line of thinking particularly persuasive.

And yet similar to GBV, it's this era of the Photon Band (essentially the debut LP, 2000's follow-up *Oh the Sweet, Sweet Changes* and the singles-etc. compilation *Our Own ESP Driven Scene*) that's been described as the "classic lineup" of Art DiFuria's thing. And that's fair, since the second album, while slightly lesser, was still very useful (and more ambitious), and the comp was a highly cohesive listen with a few dillies thrown in.

But if fair, the "classic lineup" assessment also ignores the overriding reality of the Photon Band, for after their sophomore slab, DiFuria skipped over the Penn State border to study art history in the University of Delaware's PhD program, and the subsequent records released under the moniker returned to a one-man scenario.

2001's "Alone on the Moon" presented a real detour, being a 3-song vinyl-only 12-inch of strung-out, searching and largely lengthy





shamble (the a-side's "She Turns – And She's Turning Again" spans over eighteen minutes) that was apparently inspired by Neil Young's mid-'70s "out" period. And the next year brought the LP *It's a Lonely Planet*; while also recorded solo, it really upped the Elephant 6 action to mixed results. While it's a good record (the highpoint is a superb rethink of The Zodiacs' chestnut "Stay"), I can't help but continue thinking it would've really benefitted from an actual band dynamic.

Part of my reasoning is down to the fact that after a long absence from action the Photon Band returned, this time with all sorts of living-breathing help, with '08's *Back Down to Earth*, and I think that record bests its predecessor by a considerable margin. The Schneider situation hadn't subsided, but since big hunks of the album's heft are remindful of an at times more boldly rocking (Hendrix and even MC5 enter the equation), less effects-laden version of Fun Trick Noisemaker, who's gonna complain? Not me.

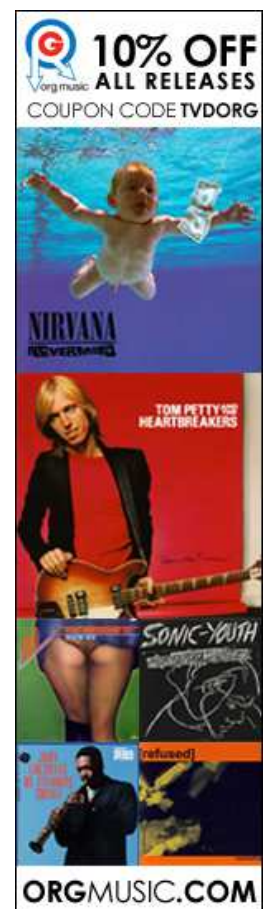
Back Down to Earth was a lot more than just the above synopsis, however. Hell, a few spots even did a good job of recalling pre-Utopia Todd Rundgren, though other material entered into a less winning middle-of-the-road (or perhaps better stated, middle-aged) zone. But the record was strong enough overall that another long layoff for the Photon Band was quite disappointing.

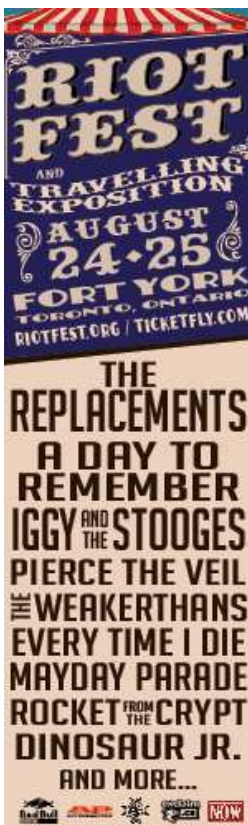
Thusly, discovering the existence of *Pure Photonic Matter (Volume 1)* was a very happy occasion. And spending some time with its contents reveals a disc that is, for the most part, an enjoyable continuation of *Back Down to Earth's* ideas, though long gone is the rush of youthful necessity that once accompanied the Photon Band. Instead, the music now seems closer to the worthy hobby of an older, wiser man (I'm guessing he earned that PhD), and this naturally brings a different sense of scale and charm to the turntable.

Interestingly, this new one significantly lessens the likenesses to Schneider as it moves deeper into more well-mannered, mature pop territory, for after a well-fleshed out introductory noodle containing the captured audio of a child obsessed with numbers (this kid really counts up a storm) titled "Thought Crimes (Part 1)" comes "What You See," and that cut finds those Elephant 6 similarities now shifting into a pop-rock zone that, on this track anyway, is pretty reminiscent of '80s Hoboken, though to be clear, the psych-guitar solo is pretty far from Jersey-esque.

"From Eternity (To Here)" initially flashes like Sonic Youth at their most pop-guitar oriented, but then it quickly shifts into some polite strum before taking another turn into a mid-tempo heavy place. Meanwhile, DiFuria's calm and collected vocal approach glides over the whole thing. And "Posi-vibe" also begins as a rather mild-mannered pop excursion only to again interject a more forceful motif into the equation, though even with a strongly evolving guitar solo the song's not especially suspenseful.

Much better is the sprightly jangle of instrumental "Went To the (Space Bar)," a tidy and highly enjoyable ride, and this time the downshift is very well executed. After numerous listens, it just might be my fave track on the whole LP. And besides that wiggly intro, the first side's closer "Found in Space" is the LP's least pop-





oriented, most abstract moment up to this point. And while it's nowhere near a mindblower, it does provide some welcome sonic variation.

Side two's brief instrumental opener "Soundings in Fathom" illuminates a pattern in *Pure Photonic Matter (Volume 1)*'s construction; while best assessed as a tweaked pop album, it's the little tweaks that really add a lot. "Believe in Believin'" brings the melodicism back in full-force and with a real sense of urgency, though I wouldn't have minded a little more amplifier burn. The tendency to not obscure DiFuria's vocals is understandable, since that's been the way with the Photon Band for a long while now, but a higher plateau of abrasiveness would've had a positive effect, at least on this track.

"...But I Wanna Know" slows it down and turns up the psych a bit, and does so without losing a handle on the (good) melody, but "Pret-ty Lies" comes next, and it's easily the least appealing song on the record. It digs deep into a zone I can't help but associate with the more abrasively clever side of '80s college pop-rock. And "Don't Feel Bad" sorta mines similar territory, but since it's less "smart" and more inclined toward a curiously out-of-time updating of stripped-down '60s-'70s guitar-pop tendencies, it's a much swallow.

I'd willing gulp down a whole bottle of "Thought Crimes (Part 2)" though, for the track's a slow build of guitar wrangle that stands right up and apart from the general pop-focus this album displays, growing methodically until the bottom drops out. I could've easily taken another five minutes or so, but then "Repose" comes along with a brief and very engaging bit of closing instrumental drift.

In summation, this is a modest record by a musician that's been knocking around for two decades. The songwriting, which is accomplished and holds occasional flashes of tangible inspiration, is ultimately low-key. Likewise, its delivery is assured but understated, and even the packaging, while certainly a solid production job, doesn't scream out for attention with the bold (and pricy) craftsmanship of many current offerings.

Pure Photonic Matter (Volume 1) can be described as a minor LP by a guy with some major achievements in his background, and while I fumbled with the temptation to call it an album mainly for the Photon Band's longtime fans, after consideration it's got enough good moments in its grooves that the whole shapes up as a little bit more.

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