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Interview: Rob Kolar of He's My Brother She's My Sister

November 15, 2012 By [Janey Criss](#) [0 Comments](#)

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TST: I often try to stay away from acronyms, especially because the independent music community has been so rife with TLA (three letter acronym) abusers for the past 10 years. Man, that sounded so hipster of me. Anyway, for the purposes of efficiency – and I assume you don't mind – I'll be referring to He's My Brother She's My Sister as 'HMBSMS' for this interview. So, first things first, let's talk about your new label home, Park The Van. How's that relationship going? And, listen, I know that unless you're Guns 'N Roses or Poison, bands are supposed to speak highly of their labels – especially indie label bands. I'm not asking if they're good people or not. What is it about the way they do things that makes you comfortable with them? How do they support you that's unique?

Rob Kolar: PTV saw something early on in the band. They believed in our potential and saw beyond something purely superficial. They had a much more genuine and respectable approach than some other labels that you would expect more from. Merge Records, who I have been a fan of for years was particularly rude. After some dialog and even a long personal letter I wrote and sent while on the road they just chose to not even give us an answer. After they requested the record and said they would spend some time with it. Nothing. It came off really snooty to me. They preach all of this artist friendly stuff and then can't even have the decency to respond to a band they claim to be interested in checking out. A 'No' would have been totally fine. But to not even respond felt insulting. PTV has been nothing but responsive, supportive, and really see our career in terms of the bigger picture. Not an overnight, 'one album to the top' kind of mentality, but something that is built respectably over time. Dr. Dog, who they helped break, is a great example – a band that has integrity and has developed a great sound, fanbase and reputation by continuing to build and make interesting choices.

TST: Do you have interaction with any of the other artists on the label? Or have you become major fans (or were you already) of any of them?

RK: Dr. Dog is one of my favorite current bands. I enjoy The Generationals and Empress Hotel but I do need to go deeper into the catalog. They released a one off with our friends Paper Bird who we will be touring with in February/March 2013. I'm really looking forward to that run. It takes us through Texas, Florida, the South and Colorado, among other states.

TST: Who's been your favorite band to tour with over the past couple of years and why?

RK: We do love our ol' pal Shakey Graves. Not only is he a talented lyricist, fantastic guitar player/singer, and he plays kick drum and tambourine while belting such

memorable tunes, but his set up is so simple we can leave all our gear on stage exactly where we want. :) We loved doing shows with Devil Makes Three. And of course The Magnetic Zeroes and The Blow were very helpful in jumpstarting our touring careers, so we are so grateful for those opportunities.

TST: One of the terms used to describe your music (maybe by you, perhaps) is 'Vaudeville-y.' That's certainly not deniable, but who's the Vaudeville fan, and to what extent?

RK: I think a critic used that term specifically, but we embrace it. For me it comes from a love of carnivals, the bizarre, sideshow and the circus atmosphere. Something I have been drawn to since a kid. I remember visiting a circus with my uncle Ian Shaw in England (I grew up there as a boy for several years) and watching stout men do back flips and other oddities which excited me and stayed with me. I've always been somewhat drawn to the weird fringes of culture and society.

The girls grew up more in the theater world so they have always been influenced by the stage and performing arts beyond music. I think we all have an affinity to the notion of 'putting on a show,' and helping the audience escape into another world or dimension for a moment.

TST: One of the biggest, general compliments floating around about HMBSMS is how fantastic you sound live. Now, over the years, and through personal experience, I've learned that bands – really good bands – usually consider themselves more partial to either being a 'live band' or a 'studio band.' Do you feel, from inside the circle, that you're a good example of the former of these, and how do you weigh the importance of playing amazing against recording amazing records.

RK: I suppose it's rather subjective. But I am very fond of studio work and see it as a different hat we put on. A chance to think more about the song and it's representation than the energy of the performance. That being said, we recorded our album mostly live with no click track. The tempos move and the bass and rhythm guitar swing together. Aaron's expressive and spontaneous slide has the impromptu quality of a live show. But in the end there is nothing quite like soulful frenzy reached in some of our live experiences – people singing, sweating, dancing and laughing. Sometimes we even transcend our bodies or a moment and get a taste of some other perception lingering in the universe.

TST: So how do you weigh the importance of 'looking the part' and 'delivering a show' against sounding pristine? How rehearsed is it all? I.e. do you focus more on the music, and the rest comes naturally, or vice versa?

RK: We are quite fashion conscious because... I suppose, we always have been as individuals (maybe not Aaron as much). But the rest of us have fun exploring our identities through clothing as well as music and performance. I am very influenced by Marc Bolan, Western films, Clockwork Orange, Tim Burton, Beck, Jack White, The Clash, Hendrix, Syd Barrett and others, in terms of style. I love venturing into thrift and vintage stores on the road and taking a chance on some new garb.

A lot of bands pride themselves in not caring about what they wear on stage, which seems a bit of an oxymoron to me. We love getting the chance to add to the atmosphere with some interesting attire. As an audience member I love seeing bands that take chances and help shape modern culture. We aim to do the same.

TST: Do you consult stylists for special performances, etc.? How do the aesthetics all come together?

RK: Each of us has something different going on. Rachel has gotten a little more edgy and 'out there' recently, which I really like. She has this sort of futuristic rockabilly meets John Waters thing happening, which I dig – full body suits and a badass leather jacket vest. Lauren definitely leans more towards mod and 60s fashion of swinging London. I have a bit of UK glam, touch of the west, a little rockabilly and circus barker rolled together. Oliver has some glam, some west, and some funky more androgynous elements along with makeup and colorful patterns. Aaron is Aaron – a dude – but I've seen him pull out some cool attire when he's in the mood. We are always encouraging him to develop his style, but we aren't gonna force him.

TST: Do your bandmates come from session musician backgrounds? Are they personal friends from home, or what's the story with the HMBSMS lineup?

RK: Slightly. I wouldn't say that so much. They have much more identity and a personal sense of expression than most studio guys/gals. But they do have the chops and musical knowledge of a studio player. I guess we get the best of both worlds. Aaron and Oliver were both friends before bandmates. We can say that about every member that ever joined or is in HMBSMS. It's the first time I've experienced that in a band and I can see why it works.

TST: Tell me about how the new record, *Nobody Dances in This Town*, was recorded. How long did it take? How did the process differ from when you recorded the EP?

RK: The album was done mostly live. Thom was really interested in capturing our live energy. He attended a variety of shows, recorded them, and had a very meticulous yet still spontaneous method of working. I really enjoyed his input and learned a lot from him. I even used a lot of his influence recording and rerecording a few of the tracks that made it on the album. We just wanted better performances so we did a few songs again (it had nothing to do with Thom's production). I am really stoked about the album, especially as a first full length. It's got variety. It's a little raw. There are elements of rockabilly, indie rock, swampy blues, California folk, early glam rock, western, country, psychedelic and anthemic rock. It's fun. It's a little dark. It's pop, it's ragged and it's slightly experimental.

TST: What is your songwriting process, and has it changed since you've been touring so much?

RK: Each song veers slightly. But some songs are old tunes of mine. Many are collaborations between Rach and I. We have had some great success when Rach has written some lyrics I dig and then I compose musical and melodic ideas to match. But it keeps evolving and changing. We may see some more input from other members now that we have a more established lineup. I'm already diving into thoughts on the new record, but I guess that's the nature of being a recording artist. Before the canvas is dry you are already sketching the next image.

TST: What bands are you dying to tour with? Any cities/venues that you have yet played but are eyeing?

RK: Dr. Dog is my first choice. They play great sized rooms which are big but still have an intimacy. They are fantastic live and I think we can have a great time together and learn a lot from each other. Jack White would be incredible. Tom Waits would be unbelievable. Gogol Bordello might be bizarre and fun, especially in Eastern Europe. The list goes on. Alabama Shakes would be a great match up. Spindrift has always been influential and a fav of Rach and I.

I think we'd really like to get over to Europe, and I am dying to play in Japan. I have this weird fantasy of one day having action figure dolls of each of us that we sell when get over there.

TST: I am in Atlanta, and was unfortunately (sadly) not able to make it to your show at Terminal West the other night. How did that go, and what was your perception of the venue? Do you prefer those types of 'artist complex' facilities or traditional music venues more?

RK: I love the room and the show was fun – good and supportive crowd. A little disappointed in the sound mix and got some mixed feedback about it. We love playing Atlanta and I think our next show is at The Earl. Hope we get Jonathan, who is one of our fav sound guys in the country to work with. We love playing the south. Was the perfect way to end this last tour on a high note!

TST: How important is it to you to make your records available on vinyl? Is it just another necessary media type, or is it a personally important format and practice to you?

RK: I'll say this: it's really fun for us as a band and there's nothing like holding that piece in your hand. The artwork is more enjoyable and we did a limited run of blue vinyl so it was pretty thrilling to open it up and slide the colored disc out. Also the sound is warm and sonically more pleasing; (I find) it encourages fans to really spend time with the whole album and treat it with more respect and focus. Music has become a bit disposable and records inspire people to delve into an album and get to know it. That's what I loved about reading lyric books and letting cassettes run their course as a kid.

TST: What's been the most wowing/humbling compliment, review or response to the new record or this stint of the tour?

RK: We've had a few fans tell us that our music has helped them in trying times – through illness and loss of loved ones. People play us at their weddings. I like that our music can act as a remedy and a source of inspiration. I suppose people get wasted and have a good time to it as well. Diversity in experience is good and I'm glad we can help provide that for fans.

TST: Any other information that readers should know about what's happening right now in the HMBSMS world?

RK: We have big plans beyond just a touring rock and roll band. They may take some time to ferment, but stay tuned. Is that too ambiguous? Good.

TST: Ha! Nah. Thank you very much for your time, and have fun with Southern Culture on the Skids tonight! [post-dated]

RK: Thank you. Southern Culture are incredible and some of the nicest people we have met on the road. Go see 'em live. And try and get on stage when they throw out pieces of fried chicken at the audience. We had that duty and came away with giant grins, all smelling like greasy birds.

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