



## Gerry Ranson talks to Will Johnson, of Centro-matic and South San Gabriel, about the bands' latest joint effort

Just North of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, perched on I-35, the North-South Interstate that bisects the Lonestar State of Texas, Denton is home to two universities and a music school. Unsurprisingly, it has a very fertile music scene. It's one that has spawned an assortment of groups and artists over the years, from the bawdy Slobberbone to the Biblical Lift To Experience and the genteel Norah Jones. Midlake is another Denton outfit, as is Centro-matic. Or rather, Centro-matic is *two*. For when they're not gigging or recording as Centro-matic, like as not they'll be performing the same tasks in the guise of South San Gabriel. Confused? You will be.

Forming in the mid-90s, Centro-matic – songwriter and guitarist Will Johnson, keyboardist Scott Danbom, bassist Mark Hedman and drummer Matt Pence – soon found that some of the material that they were coming up with was a little too quiet and introspective compared with the louder, more jarring stuff they'd been doing previously. Rather than see this as just another angle for the band, they gave the project a new name, South San Gabriel, and released its first fruits, the album *Songs/Music*, at the same time as Centro-matic's *All The Falsest Hearts Can Try*, when they signed a European deal with Holland's Munich label in 2000.

Since then, things have happened for Centro-matic and South San Gabriel by turn, with occasional solo outings by Johnson thrown into the mix. Yet as luck would have

it, what was originally a side project has snowballed, with South San Gabriel picking up support tours with Wilco and My Morning Jacket and receiving critical acclaim for the albums *Welcome*, *Convalescence* and particularly *The Carlton Chronicles*, a song-cycle from the point of view of a lost cat. At various times, it's looked like South San Gabriel was leaving Centro-matic standing. How do they line-up now?

"One band is just as important as the other," says Johnson diplomatically. "They represent two sides of our little musical world. In the end each receives equal consideration from us collectively."

The spark for this interview is that what has perhaps been on the cards for some years has finally happened: a joint Centro-matic/South San Gabriel album in the shape of *Dual Hawks*, an elaborate two-disc opus with one disc dedicated to each band. So why, after the two careers (or three, if you count Johnson's solo work) have rubbed along quite happily for so long, have they chosen to issue a joint album now? Was it something planned or did they just have both albums ready to go at the same time?

"*Fort Recovery* was originally considered for release as a double, but we sorta talked ourselves out of it at the witching hour," he says, referring to Centro-matic's 2006 debut for Cooking Vinyl. "The double album has been something we've wanted to do for a while, and after many releases, we figured why not now? Why not both bands, even?"

It was time to do something unconventional, yet fan-friendly. A handful of folks we know originally saw this release as risky and, overall, unsafe. I disagree. We feel like it's done in the spirit of what independent music should be about. You gotta keep yourselves interested, excited and even a little nervous at times. That's what creating art has always been about, to me."

And it is risky. As chief songwriter, Johnson is effectively laying bare his art, allowing one set of songs to be judged against another, when presumably they all came from the same place, the same muse. How does he feel about one half of *Dual Hawks* ridiculously outshining the other? Is he secretly rooting for one half to be a bigger hit with the fans?

"No, but if that happens, then so be it," he says, once again the pinnacle of diplomacy. This man just won't be riled. "It's not in our control once it's released, yet it's all music we're proud of. We're content with what each side offers and represents. I will root for both of them and hope that they will eventually afford all of us some first-rate hot tubs in our backyards."

The Centro-matic half of *Dual Hawks* is quite a return to form for the band, on a par with 2001's excellent *Distance And Clime*, and featuring Johnson's trademark weirdly-cinematic sci-fi lyrics (presumably inspired by his former career in the toxic waste business) set upon his squalling guitar, Danbom's grandiose keyboards and Pence's Bonhamesque drums. And as usual, it was

recorded in the band's studio with Pence at the controls.

Yet the South San Gabriel half, traditionally quieter, based around ballads, is this time around more wayward, encroaching on the territory of its more unruly neighbour. Do they have heated debates in the studio about which band gets which song? Do they ever listen to the finished product and think "Er, that's really a Centro-matic song!"? And vice versa?

"No debates, really," ponders Johnson, thoughtfully. "If a song's sitting on the fence we'll discuss it some, but it's usually pretty evident where they're gonna fall once they're written."

There's no getting away from the fact that the South San Gabriel sound is much more labour-intensive. On this occasion, the band really went to town, with strings and woodwind. "We wanted it to be as musical as we could possibly make it," he says. "It's a collective. We wanted a lot of people involved and were fortunate enough to have a good deal of talented friends available to play on the record."

So was it a conscious decision for it to be more soundscapey, as opposed to being built on ballads? "In the end, yes," he agrees. "I've been listening to a lot of old



dub records, DJ Shadow and Jandek lately. Whether or not those artists have consciously or subconsciously influenced our recordings I cannot say. Maybe in some ways."

Having read thus far, one might surmise that the band simply makes life difficult for

itself. Do they never consider that maintaining this dual identity might be more trouble than it's worth and that it'd be a whole lot easier to just have the one vehicle?

"Not right now, but I'm open to that possibility ... of those feelings, at some point."

One major issue that the band has had to contend with is that, for the last few years, Johnson has been living two hundred miles down the road in Austin. This appears to have had little or no ill effect on their working practices. In fact, it's probably helped.

"It's good in that the lines are well defined between our musical and personal lives," agrees Johnson. "It's improved our organisational skills and our planning, and I think we're as productive as we've ever been with this set-up. We still very much consider our band to be from Denton, and still feel a strong connection with it."

It's clear that Johnson is a talented wordsmith. All his and the band's albums have intriguing titles bordering on the esoteric. So how did he come up with the name *Dual Hawks*? "I'm real into hawks," he says, matter-of-factly. "It had to be in the title somehow. It's a good fit for the roles I see both bands playing here." □