Interview: Citizen @ The Nile Theatre
Submitted by javiPerez on Sun, 11/26/2017 - 2:58pm

I talked to Nick Hamm, Guitarist of Citizen, who just put out their third full length record, As You Please. We chatted about the album artwork, the social responsibility of a band and our favorite vines!

Javi Perez: Can you introduce yourself?

Nick Hamm: Hi, I am Nick, I play guitar in the band Citizen.

I heard that you guys played an acoustic set today how was that?

NH: It was amazing actually. I think it was my favorite one that we’ve done on this tour. We did it at Zia Records in Mesa and we’ve been doing them on this tour, which is kind of a new thing, I mean we have done them in the past but this tour we decided to go hard and like certain cities and record stores that showed interest in hosting them. So we’ve been doing a bunch of the and today’s was like really really good, there was a lot of people and I was surprised.

Yeah Zia is a really cool place

NH: Totally, I bought like five movies They have the deals on movies!

I heard that you did the cover of the album, As You Please.

NH: That’s right.

Can you tell me your process and how you went about that?

NH: So I had the artwork idea when we were still in the studio but I couldn’t complete them because ya know, we were away from home and I didn’t have the means so I started sketching out ideas and I was telling the guys this is the kind of concept I have. They were like that’s cool but you know you can’t visualize something like that just by saying it. It is such a simple idea that it could very easily look stupid. Something so minimal could easily go the wrong direction. When I got home, I was really excited to do it. One of the first days I got home I just went and bought fabric and did all the cutting myself. I was going to sew all the stars on but I liked the way you could see shadows underneath the stars and I would have lost that if I sewed them. Then I took a photo of it and I printed and scanned it to get a grainy texture. I sent it to the band and immediately they were like YES, THIS IS COOL. It was pretty simple and didn’t go through a bunch of drafts.

So I’m kind of a graphic design person as well

NH: Oh cool cool

So what are some of your inspirations?

NH: I have many but as time goes on my inspiration kind of start to pull away from the graphic side of things and more into the paintings and drawing and cutting. I think a pretty direct inspiration for the album artwork was Matisse because once he got into his cutout phase, I was just really interested in that and I thought it was really cool to take away the medium of painting and you’re kind of left to
work with whatever you got. So that is what I was interested in at the time. Otherwise, I think there is a lot of amazing artist currently. Braulio Amado is one that I like currently. Sam Rizer is an artist from New York that I think is really really good. I've been trying to hound him for a Citizen design for a minute but we'll see if that happens.

If you would have gotten him to do the record cover, would you have been okay with that?

NH: For some reason, I really like to keep the record covers to myself. I don't know if it's just because it's easier that way or if I maybe a little too precious with it but I like to keep the covers within the band and you know I've had help from other members in the past. So then when we get into shirts and things like that we are able to collaborate and I have a lot of fun with that.

I was looking at the record and I saw, what I think is a drawing of Bob Ross, what's that about?

NH: Oh hahaha it's Gil Scott Heron but so many people have been like is that Bob Ross?? No no it's Gil Scott Heron.

Who is that?

NH: He is a really prolific artist from the 60's that has become over time synonymous with the civil rights movements and he was an activist. I think he had a lot of really good views and a really interesting perspective and something I think is really interesting about him is his first album, Pieces of a Man, is one of my favorite albums, the opening song is The Revolution will not be Televised and so he kind of became thought of this activist, very politically charged artist but the rest of the album is really heart breaking and I think it is really interesting how he has become, not to discount his activism or his political message but he has a lot to offer that I think is really interesting and that I don't think a lot of people go to him for. I think that is really cool and there is something in that, that I really like so he was just somebody that I was like I am going to draw Gil cuz I like him so yeah.

Cool, to go off of that, I saw you guys here (Nile Theatre) last year and you guys had a donation box for Planned Parenthood, how did that come about, why did you want to do that?

NH: Well it began in conversations with Evan, a guy that was doing sound for us at the time and in this current political climate, I just think it is important for bands to be doing what they can to help people that are most affected by the presidency and policy changes. So yeah, it just kind of happened and we thought, this is not us doing this, this is us alongside everybody that is coming to the shows and it just gave an opportunity for people that maybe otherwise wouldn't know how to donate or how to help or how to enact change and kind of energize them into doing so. So that was really cool, we raised quite a bit alongside everyone that came to the tour and people were really excited that we were doing it. I think a lot of people don't really consider us the most, I don't know, political band I suppose but I think they would probably be surprised by a lot of our conversations which are kind of centered around outrage over everything going on currently. But yeah, you just kind of need to do what you can. On this tour we had in Detroit, we had donations and we donated to the Toledo Public Schools Foundation.
Oh yeah I saw that.

NH: And it was really cool. People are excited about that kind of thing and that excites me because it’s just like ya know I am glad that they like the music and everything and it’s just really cool when people are excited to help others in any way they can. So yeah that was just another example of that and again that’s thanks to people coming to the shows. I don’t take any credit for that.

Yeah I think it is really important to have these conversations and I think people here in Arizona are more open to it, I think.

NH: Yeah, I think so. From traveling you kind of pass through every point of view in America. You know, you go through these middle of America states where it’s almost not surprising the way that a lot of people think there. It is very closed off, it’s not a perspective in which I think the entire country should run on but it is a perspective that I don’t have and have never had and so initially it is hard to understand but I just think there is so many different perspectives and walks of life. I don’t think the Trump perspective is right at all but I also can’t even begin to enter that state of mind to understand it but it’s interesting like once you get down here, you go into California, Arizona. People are really open minded, really friendly and so diverse and that’s really cool. We come from Toledo, Ohio which is a pretty diverse city and so people think differently. When you’re in these diverse cities, New York you know, I don’t come across these weird opinions as much. It certainly exists but then you know certain parts of Southern Michigan are like very white and that’s it. It’s white as far was the the eye can see and I think that is a dangerous perspective on which our country shouldn’t be run on but unfortunately it is so I think everyone else has to take matters into their own hands and do all they can.

Thanks so much for doing the donation boxes, I thought it was really cool to see that coming from you guys.

NH: Yeah of course, of course.

So to get into the new album, congratulations it’s released!

NH: Thank you!

How did the recording process differ from the last records?

NH: Pretty greatly actually. This time around we were super prepared and that is unlike Citizen, let me tell you! This time around we just happened to have 16 songs going in, which generally we go in with like 8, so we doubled the workload on this one.

Did you prepare yourself, like did you say “guys we have to have this many songs ready by this time”?

NH: yeah, I think it wasn’t even as much like crunch time it was more like we were excited and we really kept moving which is like very unusual for us. Usually, not that we are not excited generally but I just think this time around we were like really hungry to make a really amazing album. We were prepared, we went in there and we had extra time where we could really color the songs we wanted to and I think you can hear that. It sounds more realized than we ever have before.

If you had to describe the sound, what would you say?
NH: I would say dynamic. You know there is songs that are intended to bang and then there is songs that are really pretty and calm and kind of serene so I think that we have a lot to offer across the album and I think that people can find something they like in it.

I was listening to it on the drive here and it was just like so layered. It was so nice, I was going to ask, in the song, in the Middle of it All, there is a guitar part that’s like shimmery, how do you do that?

NH: I know exactly what part you are talking about and I actually really like getting to that part when we play it live like I am excited to get there because it’s just a nice break in the song. The song you know is not abrasive but it’s kind of pummeling the whole time. It’s hitting you and then you get to this part and it’s like this very flat, I don’t know, I think you’re word was good, shimmery and um I don’t know. It’s just one of those things that came out when it was being written, it was just like, it makes sense, which is funny because leading into that part, originally it was written a little differently so the demo version and the album verison are a little different, which I think is cool.

Do you have a favorite song off the record?

NH: I do have a favorite song off the record. It’s Discrete Routine. Mat and Ryland wrote that one together and so I got to listen to it from an outside perspective, first time I heard it I just thought wow this is a powerful change for Citizen. It felt very new, exciting, fresh, so I was really excited about that one and I still am and we’ve never played it live so I still have room for my excitement to come up. I’m excited to play it live if we can nail it.

Do you have a favorite song to play live?

NH: We just started playing a song called Ugly Luck off the record and I really really like playing it live. I don’t know, it’s not even a song that has a consistent beat where you can get into it but it’s just so fun to play and I think it’s just a well written song and I’ve been pretty excited about playing it when we get to it in the set, I’m like stoked to play it.

So how was the crowd reaction been different from your past releases?

NH: It’s been really really good. I am shocked actually because we kick it off with Jet and the crowd knows it like they know an old song and I can’t even explain how cool that feels because it is such a gamble. You never know if people are going to like what you put out and not that it even matters but when you’re playing live, it kinda does matter. You want people to get really into what you’re creating. So yeah the new songs have been going over better and better every night as we go on, it just gets more exciting. So yeah really, really good and the old stuff still goes over really well and it’s just like a well balanced set in general.

So it wrap it up, have you beat the Ciz Fighter game yet?

NH: I have not beat it which a lot of people have beat it, I have not which is crazy, I am just not good.

Yeah I found it really hard!

NH: Yeah me too!

You have to be really fast to press the buttons

NH: Yeah it’s funny because I told Mat, I think that
you should make it easier and he was like no no no not making it easier like you just have to get better and I was like alright fine ya know and then people started beating it and I was like okay well I guess it is me so I gotta work on it but he’s working on an update so I’m gonna wait until that comes out and then I’ll do it.

and lastly do you have a favorite vine?

NH: Yeah I do actually, my favorite vine is... are you pretty in touch?

I am well versed, I know too much

NH: My favorite vine is “oh yes wait a minute Mr. Postman, yeahhhh.”

Wow you nailed that, that was good!

NH: Yeah that is my favorite and we go through that one a lot. Another, wait now you got me started and now I can’t be stopped. Another favorite vine of mine is the lady who sees a rat in Walmart, the fake rat.

Hahahahahah yeah

NH: And she goes AZZAHHH and we like die laughing at that one. What’s your favorite vine?

There’s one that is a girl talking to her brother and she goes “hey i’m a lesbian” and the brother goes “i thought you were American”?

NH: Oh aahahahahah I’ve seen that one, it’s a classic!

Yeah or “hurricane Katrina, more like hurricane tortilla”

NH: Hahaha I don’t know that one.

YOU DON’T KNOW IT, OH IT’S SO FUNNY!

I need to get a little more well versed in vine culture.

All I do is watch is the rip vine comps.

NH: We stayed at somebody’s house on this tour and they were watching an r.i.p. vine comp and it was I don’t know, they were on some shit it was not funny.

You have to like really search for the funny ones!

NH: Yeah totally there is diamonds in the rough for sure but i still appreciate vine.

Do you know the artist SZA?

NH: Yes of course.

So they took the vine of the girl going AZZAHHH, and said this is how you pronounce her name.

NH: Hahaha that’s funny. It’s funny because for the longest time I was like how the hell do you pronounce her name and I never even considered that it would be the same as RZA, I just assumed it ZZAAAA and I was like what a weird name. Now I’m like SZA, I sound like such an idiot when I say it now.

At least you learned through vine.

NH: Totally, totally.

Well yeah that is it, thank you so much, have a good one.

NH: Thanks for talking to me, it was very nice to meet you, you coming to the show?
Yeah of course

NH: Sick, well I'll see you in, bye bye!