

**On Tour With Moonraker**  
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**It's a long, boring drive down the 401 between Toronto and Montreal. Luckily, I'm on the road with Moonraker, the hot new "dance-rock" band, featured recently in the "On the Verge" section of *Relix*. As we cruise past the evergreens and cut rock of Southern Ontario in their worn and dented van, they entertain me with stories from the road.**

**Moonraker got their start in Boston in 2000, and continued to receive accolades for their compelling live performances and debut disc *Nada Brahma*. In early 2003 they finally released their long-awaited second full length *Moonraker* and toured heavily to promote it from their new home base in Brooklyn under the watchful guise of the jamband scene. Their geographical change coincided with a subtle but welcome shift in their music. What started as an homage to trip-hop artists like Portishead and Massive Attack, has morphed into a more relaxed and organic sound, one that embraces the full breadth of their musical influences.**



**Kelli Scarr showing love for the Maple Leaf**

**Touring is as gruelling as it is rewarding: for every story of late-night jam sessions and hotel parties, there are stories of lonely nights in hotel rooms, broken down vans, and in Moonraker's case, natural disasters. Last year, the band was stuck in Canmore (near Calgary) under a one-hour evacuation notice due to the forest fires raging outside the city.**

**If this wasn't enough, the band suddenly found themselves plunged into darkness during the summer blackout. "We were freaking out because we needed to get to Berkfest in Massachusetts, and the Albany airport had no power," says keyboardist Dan Chen. "We finally made it, but when we flew back out to Whistler a few days later for some dates on the West Coast, you could still**

see the flames reaching up out of the trees. It was night-time and the forests were glowing orange."

For the past 12 months, Moonraker have played over 110 shows, from the southernmost corners of the United States, to the long tree-lined roads of Canada. "How did you avoid getting burnt out?" I ask. "We didn't," says singer Kelli Scarr, "we all just wanted to get home." "At some points we felt awful," says Chen, "you're all crammed into this one van, living out of a bag. You don't know where your home is. It gets to the point where you need some sort of grounding. The bigger acts follow a routine every night – if you've got that same plate of vegetables at each show you play, that acts like your home, it provides some stability to your chaotic life."

Touring after 9/11 also proved challenging. At an airport in Texas, coming home from the SXSW music festival last year, three Moonraker members were detained over security fears. Chen, with true Canadian aplomb, made the mistake of challenging the security guards. After a brief scuffle they were detained, questioned, and then cautiously allowed on a plane to get to their next gig in L.A.

"They're more stringent at the border these days. They grill you a little more," says Chen. "So far we're OK because two of us have Canadian passports; but Kody [Akhavi; bass player] gets more problems because his name is Iranian."

When the popular press describes bands like Moonraker "exploding onto the scene" or "coming out of no-where," you can think of stories like these as the brutal truth behind the polished veneer.

Last night, they played their first date on their current tour in Toronto at the Rivoli on Queen Street. My own band, the Gardens Faithful, performed a quick opening set, warming up the crowd with our own sound, employing a vintage Fender Nordelectro and a Rhodes to drive the melodic hooks. Moonraker hit the stage with



the new "Time for the Parting," and continued with a vibrant set for almost 80 minutes to the capacity crowd.

When Moonraker perform, they actively play with each other instead of just relaying pre-packaged songs. They relish in riding the waves of each song to see where it will go. Sometimes disco influences shine through and the crowd is treated to

Moonraker on stage at Le Swimming in Montreal

simple, layered structures reminiscent of the New Deal or Sound Tribe Sector 9. Often harder influences like the Pixies rear up, but the key is the looping, which they achieve within the digitized framework of Dan Chen's atmospheric keyboards, providing padding in the background and droplets of sound to the tapestry of reverb and cymbals.

On Saturday, we pull into the evening glow of Montreal and head up St. Catherine to the club Le Swimming. Moonraker sets up their equipment under the glare of a large-screen TV and a few enraptured Canadiens fans. Drummer Dan Mintzer, guitarist Dave Moltz, and bass player Kody Akhavi warm up to an easy, ambient three-chord jam reminiscent of early Verve or Phish's "Piper." They lounge while they play, and fiddle with some settings, but never seem to leave the beat behind, communicating the entire time to get their brains warmed up as well as their fingers.

Over Korean food before the show, Kody explains Moonraker's limited success touring the continent: "I don't think we're very easy to categorize," he says. "We've got the electronic sound, but also the rock sound with these pop hooks. Record companies don't usually take a chance on bands that aren't easily categorized."

But this adherence to their own set of rules and standards is eventually what will make Moonraker enduring in the long run: "People are receptive to music like this. The whole idea of festivals and getting so deeply into the music is almost like a religious experience," he says. "You can see it in people. They love being a part of something bigger than themselves."



The long drive through the prairies

something you go to after you buy the album. Our live shows channel a lot of energy and the jam-band crowds really pick up on that."

When musing about the direction of the band, though, Kody admits that "the jam-band scene has been great, but doesn't fully describe us as a band, either." Dan Chen agrees, but adds, "the good thing about the jam-band scene is that it's so receptive to new stuff. Fans see the live show as part of the experience instead of

A few hours later, you can see this unfolding on the packed dance floor at Le Swimming. The band swings into action with a few new songs with strong melodic hooks, then temper their pop sentiments by jamming on some older tunes. During these breakdowns, singer Kelli Scarr often moves to the side of the stage to let the audience enjoy the musical communication between the boys in the back.

After a few songs, an audience member shouts out for "Can I Love," a song they haven't played in months. They do it anyway. With shrugs, they launch into a shaky yet dynamic version. They close with an encore to euphoric applause.

"The crowds up here are so receptive," says Scarr after they leave the stage, "we love playing up in Canada." With ex-pat Canadian Dan Chen in the band, they've found themselves on bills with many Canadian bands such as Toronto's own New Deal, the Broken Social Scene, and the Stars. It can also be a bit of a curse to say you're from New York these days, says Chen: "New York is always overexposed. It's actually bad for PR, people start thinking 'Oh yeah, another band from New York'; there's just so many."

With this, they pack their van and roll across the border to Burlington, Vermont, to get ready for another set of shows in upstate New York.

Moonraker believe the key to surviving the fickle and brutal world of the music industry is adaptability. They have succeeded in evolving from a sound firmly based in the trip-hop tradition, to embracing diverse influences like Slowdive and the shoegazer sound of the nineties, improvisational rock, blues, and even the punk-disco stylings of newer bands like the Walkmen.



Living out of a van for months at a time: one of the joys of touring the jamband scene

Their new album, *Peeg Vater*, due out this month, reflects this eclecticism. Featuring a killer 8-minute opening track, the album accurately reflects their live sound and the complex pastiche of influences that created the band in the first place. This disc's got "layers upon layers of stuff," says Chen.

As I write this, Moonraker are finally taking a break from their gruelling touring schedule. But they've already got a new EP in the works and dates planned for the late summer. So the iconic maroon van might be on blocks for a while, but it'll be leaping out of stasis soon and rolling into your town. Check [www.moonrakermusic.com](http://www.moonrakermusic.com) for tour dates and downloads.

