Provincial Archive holds sensitive secrets

Craig Schram explains album art’s dark past, but remains tight-lipped on lyrics’ hidden meanings

**music preview**

**The Provincial Archive**

**With John Spencer**

Saturday, September 11 at 8 p.m.

**The Royal Theatre (10708-214 St.)**

**$10 at www.theprovincialarchive.com**, **VE glide, Blackbird**, and **Liberis Records**; **$20 at the door**

** MARLENE SMITH**

Arts & Entertainment Staff

To be an artist frequently necessitates a sort of double life, from high-school kids in class during the day, only to daydream about their after-school garage band jam later that night, to struggling actresses who are forced into waitressing jobs to help make each month, making a career out of. — or even just getting it to pay the bills — is a long and difficult process. For The Provincial Archive’s Craig Schram, his role is lyricist, instrumentalist, and lead vocalist in his band makes up only one part of his life: by day he works as a researcher at the University of Alberta, with two degrees already under his belt. But when asked if he’d rather devote all his time to music and his bandmates, his eyes light up.

“Oh man,” he says emphatically, “absolutely.”

He purses for a moment in thought. “I guess a big part of being successful as a band is marketing and selling yourself. And it’s really hard to do sometimes you feel like you’re selling your soul, particularly if you’ve adopted some sort of identity as a band with a genre or something. And then, really, you’re marketing yourself to certain people, and you create pressure on yourself to make a certain type of music.”

“I’m sort of hands off what they used to do,” he continues, “number one — you have to actually start making things good [...]. And then you have to be able to put on a good show.”

The Provincial Archive has been pretty successful in “making things good,” with the conclusion of their first major cross-country tour and the release of their sophomore album, *Maybe We Could Be Holy*, both taking place within the span of a month.

“We were even on the cover of *Douglas Book*, the *Weekly Arts* magazine) when we were in Ottawa, and we were basically confused when that happened,” Schram laughs. “We just didn’t expect to get that sort of response across the country.”

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**CRAIG SCHRAM**

**LEAD SINGER, THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVE**

Locally, they’ve been received enthusiastically as well, with their slot at the Sound of the Old Strathcona Music Festival, packing the Black Dog to capacity, leaving would-be attenders straining to listen to the band from the sidewalk outside.*

“Basically, we’ve abandoned the idea of rules for our music,” he says, explaining their recent accomplishments. “We’re not trying to constrain ourselves with anything, and as a result of that, I’m really, really happy with how the music turns out, and I can say that I’ve achieved what I set out to do after we finish writing a song. I’m not really trying to please anybody, you know? I honestly believe in what I’ve created, so I’m happy to share it.”

While Schram may be eager to allow the world access to his music, there’s another side to the band’s work that takes a bit of a deeper investigation to discover. Even the latest album cover holds secrets — at first glance, it’s just a faded photo of four boys with their eyes shut. However, a cryptic list on the back covers the album’s cover image itself.

“One of these boys is dead,” Schram explains. “The photographer is a sociologist named Lewis Hope and he was an advocate for children’s rights in the workplace. [...]. A lot of the photos he took had some sort of shock value to them, or at least were meant to evoke some sort of reaction. So at that time, post-mortem photography was still popular, so people took photos of their dead relatives, often with themselves in the photo, as this weird ‘remembering them’ exercise.”

The story behind The Provincial Archive’s album art might be fair game, but asking Schram to disclose the meaning behind some of the songs he writes in a different story. In the unlikely of describing the subject matter behind the band’s two records, he suddenly interposes himself to explain his difficulty in talking about it, because he feels he needs to mask the meaning of some of the songs he’s written. Although it lies on that The Provincial Archive’s work largely deals with the documentation of his childhood, and the idea of confronting the person you were as a child from an adult perspective, his writing to discuss the specific experiences that grew both to the lyrics that make up his band’s repertoire. Beyond adding that he lives talking about the jarring world of the prairie winters, Schram isn’t giving much away.

“No one will ever know what [I Am A Believer] is about, technically,” he says of the second track (“Maybe We Could Be Holy”), saying that he fears he could end up reiterating secrets that he feels aren’t his to tell.

“I don’t want my life to turn into a Deadgrass episode,” he jokes, keeping a few secrets between himself and his band, and leaving us to decipher the rest.”