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THE MAN MAKES MUSIC: Charles Ramsey's New CD has State College Listening

By Brian J. Stokes

It's an early Sunday afternoon on the weekend before spring finals begin at Penn State and Saints Cafe in downtown State College is packed with students sipping lattes and cramming as much of the past 16 weeks into their short-term memories as they possibly can.

Charles Ramsey is sitting at a tall table in the middle of the coffee shop waiting for his Earl Grey tea to steep, a decidedly calm buoy in this sea of academic pressure and developing stomach ulcers.

Sure, Ramsey is no longer a student (he graduated in 2003 with a masters degree in music theory), but he's also riding high on the recent release of his debut solo album, "Something New," now available at City Lights, Arboria Records and Webster's Bookstore & Cafe.

"Something New" is composed of nine original songs Ramsey wrote and arranged. First-time listeners will no doubt be struck by how instantly accessible the music is, with songs such as "One in a Crowd," and "Up and Down" immediately finding a niche deep inside your brain.

In addition to his work as a solo artist, Chuck plays guitar, trombone and provides backing vocals for State College indie pop favorites The Bullet Parade. At his day job, he can be found teaching critical writing to students in Penn State's integrative arts department.

Ramsey recently took time out of his busy schedule to sit down with Blue and talk about "Something New," his influences and what's next for The Bullet Parade.

What's the significance behind the title of the album?

Titles can be really hard to come up with. There're a few good reasons for this title though. Of course, the most obvious one is the song called "Something New," which is the last track on the album. That song really sums up the entire thing. It's about leaving your comfort zone and

finding something new and different. That's a lot of what this album was about for me. I also really like a lot of the really simple album titles from the early '60s, like "Something Else," by the Kinks and "Meet the Beatles."

Is there a particular song on "Something New" that you would consider a favorite?

Not really. I mean, there's something about each song that I really like, be it an arrangement here or a melody there. One of the interesting things I've noticed is that everyone who listens to the album has a different favorite track.

How long did the album take to put together?

Most of the songs were written in late 2003 and early 2004. The newest song was written last summer and the oldest song, "Up and Down," was written about four or five years ago.

What bands influenced you most while you were putting together "Something New?"

I think you can hear a lot of influence from The Smiths and the Beach Boys. The Divine Comedy is a huge inspiration for me as well (For those not familiar, The Divine Comedy is the alias for British singer/songwriter Neil Hannon, who developed underground notoriety in the '90s).

So how did you become so involved with music, and what lead you to pursue it professionally?

Well, I was a classical junkie in the third grade. I started playing piano when I was 9 years old because I was so blown away by Beethoven, Mozart and many of the other great classical composers. I started playing the trombone in fifth grade. I was in the middle school band and there was a dire need for trombone players. I was told that if I was willing to switch over from the saxophone that I'd be able to go to Disney World with the band.

Sweet. How was Disney World?

It was great.

Because this is your first solo effort, most people probably know you as the guitarist from The Bullet Parade. How'd you make the jump from trombone and piano to guitar?

I wasn't really into rock music until I first heard Paul Simon's "Graceland." That's the album that inspired me to pick up a guitar. I started off just playing songs from that record. I remember the first one I learned was "Boy in the Bubble," which is the first track off that album.

And how did you catch on with The Bullet Parade?

Well, back during my senior year in 2001 I saw a flyer that Jeff (Van Fossan, lead singer and guitarist of The Bullet Parade) has posted. He was looking for people to start a band with and all of the influences he had listed, like The Kinks, The Stones and The Beatles, were bands that I was really interested in. It seemed like a natural fit, but at first Jeff didn't want me in the band because I was about to graduate and I wasn't sure if I would be sticking around State College for much longer. I ended up staying for graduate school, though, and things worked out.

The Bullet Parade is really firing on all cylinders these days. The crowds for your shows at Roustabout! are always impressive and really enthusiastic. What's on tap for this summer?

We've been working on recording a new album for a little while now. There's a long way to go before it's finished, but we've all been so busy this semester that it's hard to devote a lot of time. Still, we're all going to be around this summer and I'm hopeful that we can make a lot of progress toward finishing the album.

Well, I know a lot of people will be eagerly anticipating that. So what's next for Charles Ramsey? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Hopefully I'll be making music professionally. I'd like to have a few more albums under my belt, maybe even be working as a songwriter. I've always aspired to have other people sing my songs. I think if you can write a song that can be sung by a number of different people, then you've written a pretty good song.

Sounds about right to me. OK, last question: If you could collaborate with anyone in the world, who would it be?

(Laughs) Definitely Neil Hannon.