

The conservatory's complexity meets heavy metal's raw edge. By Shaun Brady



# NORMAL LOVE

Normal Love, l to r: Amnon Freidlin, Eli Litwin, Carlos Santiago, Evan Lipson, Alex Nagle.

"There's actually a school to teach you how to write pieces for Normal Love," cracks guitarist Amnon Freidlin. "It's in Vienna."

Friedlin is teasing violinist Carlos Santiago, who is attempting to explain why he's the only member of the Philadelphia-based quintet not yet to have composed for the group. But the guitarist's jibes acknowledge a few key components of Normal Love's sound: their conservatory-worthy complexity, their winking relationship with classical music, and, especially, their sneering sense of humor.

Live, the quintet—Friedlin, Santiago, guitarist Alex Nagle, bassist Evan Lipson, and drummer Eli Litwin, all in their early-to-mid-20s—combine the raw edge and ragged energy of a heavy metal band with the concentration and delicate interaction of a string quartet. Any list of antecedents would have to include Bill Laswell's *Massacre*, the impossible prog of the *Ruins*, and Glenn Branca's guitar grandeur. As their recently released self-titled CD on Philly's High Two shows, Normal Love makes brutally intricate music, aggressive and perfectionist. If *The Warriors* had slipped past the *Orphans* and the *Baseball Furies* only to chance upon a shiv-wielding thrash-chamber ensemble, these guys would be perfectly cast.

Formed in the fall of 2005, Normal Love came together organically, sharing a desire to explore similar compositional ideas. "Instrumentation was largely arbitrary," Lipson says. "I had some stubborn ideas about music and fortunately these guys were equally hard-headed, so here we are." He adds that

very few others would have their willingness to "rehearse copiously without payment."

Lipson wrote the group's first original composition, a piece in two sections entitled "The Signal's Coming From Pittsburgh" after a line from filmmaker David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. He says that the piece, an almost collage-like series of distinct musical ideas that submerge and reemerge, blend and evolve, and sometimes simply collide into one another, was an attempt "to deal with different cells of material that were seemingly unrelated and finding at least one thing that would connect them. But it's for the most part devoid of any traditional development."

The first piece the band actually performed, however, was written by an outside composer—Dustin Hurt, executive director of Bowerbird, the Philly presenting organization which has often hosted Normal Love. Hurt's "Severe Confection" is a tangled knot of choreographed, off-kilter rhythms and gnarly lines which took the band nearly four months of twice-weekly practices to perfect. "If we got the piece now, it would be a lot faster," Nagle says. "But it's such a major learning curve when you're first dealing with that kind of thing."

Friedlin refers to his piece "Ndugo" as "the pop jam of Normal Love. It's only two and a half minutes long, and it's only a few steps away from really tonal music." At one point, he relates, he wrote a since-discarded second half to the piece while traveling via Greyhound: "Every time I take the bus there's this faint smell of piss with Lysol and

it gives me a headache, so what I wrote smelled like a pissy headache and I didn't keep it."

Litwin's "The Final Sarcophagus of Darkness" started as heavy metal MIDI files that the drummer created in high school and college. "I was into writing these impossible things that I would never be able to play but I thought sounded really awesome," he explains. "And then all of those years of writing this stuff on my computer culminated in finally having a band to play it, so I put more time into it and wanted to make it pretty epic and evil and brutal. I think I succeeded."

"Hooks," Nagle's contribution, "started with a little melodic motif that I subjected to various generative processes." Despite his influences, "Hooks" is one of the least overtly metal-inflected pieces in the band's book. "In Normal Love," he says, "I want to keep the rock influence in my music to a minimum. Basically, just instrumentation and volume—but I wanted to use blast beats, because that's something very near and dear to me."

Lipson says that over time, the members' varied interests have influenced one another, as evidenced by a diverse repertoire of pieces which somehow emerge with a unified identity. "We all had our own processes and goals of what we actually wanted to achieve with this general core idea, and that was manifested in the initial pieces. Now there's more of a concrete aesthetic, but hopefully it's still evolving prismatically." \*