

# They Might Be Giants



## The Three Johns

**T**here is a man “doo, doo dooing” down the phone who has been 50 percent responsible for plenty of my own “doo, doo doos” over the past few years. John Flansburgh is one of the two Johns at the core of mercilessly melodic Brooklyn band They Might Be Giants. He is preparing recording equipment for a local band called Spondee when I phone (hence the “doo, doo dooing,” I suppose), but soon shuts himself in his bathroom to undergo this interview in peace.

John and John (Lindell) have worked as a duo since their self titled debut album was released in 1986. With the release of their latest album, *John Henry*, the band's size has tripled.

The album is named for an American folklore figure, who pitted himself against a steam-drill during the dawning of the machine age. It's an appropriate metaphor for the expansion of They Might Be Giants, who have been more accustomed to working with a tape machine, as opposed to a living, breathing band of musicians. In the folk tale, John Henry triumphs against the machine, and then carks it.

“I don't really know what the moral of the story is,” John says, “but [the band] have not keeled over yet.”

Indeed, they have not, but John says their presence took a little adjusting to.

“It kind of puts us in the uncomfortable position of being band leaders, which has been a real assertiveness training course. Beyond that, I think everything about it has been positive. It gives us a new kind of rock power we can foist on our audience. It's just great. It's a new thing for us and it's been very exciting. It's been really interesting hearing our songs fleshed out on that level. We can work with really top flight musicians, people who are much better musicians than we are ourselves.”

When he says top flight musicians, he's not kidding. Their musical pedigrees range from time in Pere Ubu (bassist Tony Maimone) to working with Mel Torme (trumpeter Frank London).

“It took a little while to get the mix of people right. We launched headlong into the world of musical personalities. That was challenging enough itself; just like who we're gonna get along with on the road, what kind of earplugs to wear, that kind of stuff.”

With almost a decade in the bag for the band's original members, I wonder what has kept them together.

“It's kind of hard to say. When we started, we didn't have any success at all, and for a few years we were just doing it for very abstract reasons. We kind of flourished in obscurity in a way, coming up with a whole style for what we did without having any of the outside pressures of a career. And being friends beforehand — I've observed other bands start and end, even within the time we have been working — I think a lot of times it really does come down to just not knowing the people you're working with that well.”

How long have you two known each other?

“Oh god,” he sighs. “One hundred and fifty years. I don't know. I guess I met John in 1970.”

Woah there Neddy! That is a long time.

“Yeah. But we were children.”

Is it with difficulty or pride that you weather the critics who've given your sound labels like ‘geek rock’, ‘nerd rock’ and ‘dweeb rock’?

“I think it's pretty inappropriate. I don't think it describes us very accurately, which is probably the biggest problem for us. If we were simply doing that kind of stuff, I guess I wouldn't have as big a problem with it. I feel like we're not really into calculating the way we perform, and we're not really into worrying about what kind of people we are. It's a very personal project for us and, essentially, it's

probably about as earnest as something that's actually interesting could be. I'd be lying if I said it didn't bug me. I think it's sort of like our cross to bear.

“The thing that makes me sad is that there is a range of material in what we do. Some of it is kind of light hearted, but a lot of it is a lot more intense than that. I think those labels keep people from checking out what we're really about. It's weirdly ironic — there are a lot of bands out there that act a lot more foolish than we do, and are presented as like spokesmen for the generation. That is the part that seems a little strange. We can't worry about that stuff.”

If it weren't for They Might Be Giants, what would your contributions to the world have been?

“I was doing magazine design before this took over my life, so probably that. But I sort of get the feeling I'd be doing music in a bar if I wasn't doing music in a theatre.”

What kind of bar musician would you be?

“The alcoholic one.”

Figures. There's no shortage of mind bending substance references in the They Might Be Giants back catalogue. In fact, I found it hard to think of any subject vein which hadn't been mined by these guys. John believes there is one.

“I sort of feel like writing a very direct love song is probably still eluding us. We've written a lot of songs about heart break, and we've written a lot of songs about romantic anxiety; those kinds of songs were definitely out of our reach when we started the band. When we were younger, we weren't really confident enough to write about that stuff, besides just a desire to not do what's been done a million times before. We also didn't feel we could really do it in a direct way. Now, we've kind of accomplished that, but I think doing a really immediate love song is still eluding us. It's been done well a few times,

and it is such a simple idea in a way, it's kind of hard to know how to approach it in this time.”

*John Henry* features the most cracking example of said “romantic anxiety” tracks since *Lincoln's* ‘I've Got A Match’ in ‘Unrelated Thing’. Recalling the suffering on the former, anyone with half a heart would surely have been shattered to hear similar emotions resurfacing six years down the track. You just pray they're not from personal experience for the poor writer's sake.

“I think all our songs come from some form of personal experience,” says John. “But I guess the point we should make is that they're songs, they're not autobiographical. I think there are people who have that kind of rock star gene, who wanna share their personal story with everybody. That's really not our trip. We try to create songs that are gonna capture people's imaginations, one way or another. It's not so much about reflecting on our souls as it is just trying to create something that's interesting to us and interesting to other people. It's hard to say where the personal part starts and ends in any given song.”

They Might Be Giants will play Auckland's Powerstation on May 21. John is looking forward to returning to Auckland, even though he has pretty strange memories of the place.

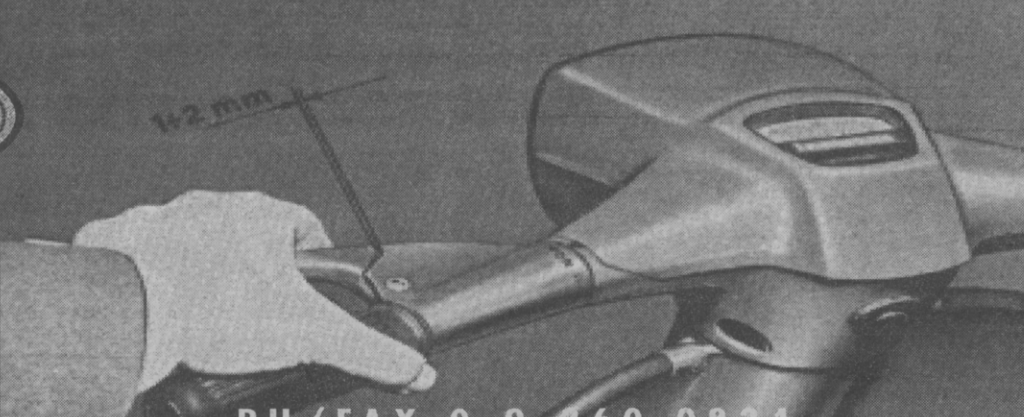
“I remember going to some private zoo the record company person was really interested in bringing us to. We thought it was gonna be a kind of a municipal zoo, but it turned out to be some guy who rents out animals for films or something. It was kinda scary. They were all kind of under combed. It was just a weird place. I don't know if that's typical or not. It was kind of cool, but it was also kind of strange. We were happy to be taken out.”

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