

The Melodious World of Seasonal

The Lancaster-based ambient band celebrates the release of its debut EP, *The World We Chose to See*

As the winter cold began to take its grip in January, Ethan McDonnell was looking for a muse to find the inspiration for his song lyrics.

The lead singer and guitarist for the brand-new Lancaster-based band Seasonal was tasked with coming up with the emotional words that would complement the complex ambient sounds being created by his fellow bandmates – guitarist Josh Sperow, bassist John Halfpenny and drummer Nick Lowry.

McDonnell says he happened to pick up a copy of the classic Virginia Woolf essay, *A Room of One's Own*, in which the well-known modernist writer discusses ways of expressing emotions and thoughts, all while attempting to remove oneself from the narrative as much as possible.

He tried to keep the objective narrative in mind as he put the lyrics on paper for Seasonal's first EP – *The World We Chose to See*. And Woolf's own narrative became the inspiration for the song "A Room to Ourselves," featuring lyrics like, "And I keep your blood in my chest/ Made new by what she told me/ and like all those who came before/ I can't keep repeating myself."

McDonnell says he feels like there's almost too much personal feeling being expressed in music lyrics today, which detracts from the storytelling. With the words contained on the six tracks on *The World We Chose to See*, he tried to create songs that were not simply about one person – a satisfying writing experiment which led him to avoid getting bogged down in his own emotions.

"While there are definitely traces of ex-loves and things that have happened to me, I tried to make up some stories on this [EP] and make characters who were going through things," McDonnell says. "I tried to stay kind of poetic and objective on this one as opposed to the past when things were very raw and if you knew me you could say, 'Oh, this is about so-and-so.'"

SEASONAL COMESTOGETHER

It's a Wednesday afternoon, and I've joined with the four young members of Seasonal at the Lancaster Dispensing Company to grab some lunch – Halfpenny, with his distinct handlebar moustache; Lowry, with his appearance of someone being just as comfortable on a surfboard as behind a drum set; Sperow, with his rugged lumbersexual beard; and the tall and somewhat clumsy McDonnell.

The quartet tells me Seasonal took shape more than a year ago, rising from the remnants of the progressive ambient band Auroras, which originally formed at Millersville University in 2010. (Sperow, Halfpenny and Lowry are all recent graduates of Millersville, while McDonnell is still studying political science and sociology at Albright College in Reading.)

Last year, Auroras was looking for a new guitarist when Lowry suggested bringing his childhood friend McDonnell to sit in. The two had grown up together in Fleetwood in Berks County, spending summers together at the local YMCA summer camp and later bonding over their mutual appreciation for late-'90s



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emo bands like Death Cab for Cutie, Say Anything and American Football.

After Auroras lead singer and guitarist Travis Williams moved to Florida with his girlfriend, the band members approached McDonnell about taking over the lead singing duties – almost forcing him into the new role. And once the four musicians started practicing together, it was a natural transition to rename the project since the band's original lead singer was gone – and the Auroras project initially started with Williams and Sperow performing together acoustically.

RECORDING THE EP

With the core group in place, the members started writing songs for Seasonal almost exactly a year ago this month, yet they didn't tell anyone except for close friends about the new musical project until this April.

Lowry says they had a general idea of what they wanted to write musically for Seasonal, but the specifics would remain a mystery until closer to the point of the recording process. Lowry pointed to the classic emo sounds he enjoyed as a teen, while Sperow wanted to write ambient guitar parts a la Slowdive or Sunny Day Real Estate.

"I always wanted to blend all the things I like, and it's worked out with this band," Lowry says.

After six months of working on



kept coming, and the melodies came together."

The first song Seasonal wrote together is the first song on the EP – "At Sunset." Lowry says the song came together organically, opening with Sperow's open D-chord, followed by Lowry's rhythmic clicking of drumsticks and McDonnell's hushed vocals, singing the lyrics, "If I leave anything behind me/A legacy of bang and boom."

The process of creating "At Sunset" was indicative of Seasonal's method

for making the rest

of the songs for *The World We Chose to See* – writing, playing and putting together each one piece by piece as they recorded. It wasn't until the album was completely finished that the band heard the songs in their entirety – a slightly nerve-wracking experience.

Another uncertainty was Seasonal's decision to bring on their friend and Millersville graduate Ian Schiela to produce the EP, considering it was the first time he ever recorded a full band. They say Schiela – who has a degree in music business technology and currently does audio production for WXPN – lobbied to record them for months before they took him up on his offer.

Sperow says there were a few strained moments between the band and Schiela, as they kept him in the studio for many months of late-night recording sessions and even used his bedroom in a converted garage behind their house in Millersville as their practice space.

"We were worried about the relationship between us and Ian," Sperow laughs.

But Sperow says Schiela did an excellent job in his first go-around of recording, creating an album that doesn't sound overproduced and capturing their sound through a natural process.

Halfpenny says another of the band's goals was to not make McDonnell sound "squeaky clean," staying as true to his vocal imperfections as possible. He says McDonnell has year-round allergies and coughs exactly the same every time – an aspect they were able to capture on tape and include at the beginning of the song "Neil, My Boy!"

McDonnell, who grew up going to poetry readings with his mother (an English professor and former poet laureate of Berks County), says he didn't start working on the lyrics to the songs until well after the guitar parts were in place. He says he likes to hear the music before he puts down the lyrics – especially since Sperow plays an influential part in the creation of the guitar parts for the songs.

"Josh is such a heavy lifter when it comes to the melodies," McDonnell says. "So I don't want to set anything in stone because I want to hear where Josh is going with a song before I start figuring stuff out."

Sperow, who is a visual artist, also played a major role in the artwork for *The World We Chose to See*. The band decided to use a photo he took along the banks of the Susquehanna River from a college photo series he created, highlighting a dock near Washington Boro in Lancaster County, and set off by a frame he suspended.

McDonnell says he's experienced a "gratifying, self-assuring moment" with the public's response to the May release of *The World We Chose to See*, receiving positive feedback from friends, family and even complete strangers who have stumbled upon it on the Internet. He says the band's ultimate goal was to create songs that are accessible to multiple music fans.

"To be a band making the music that people grew up with is awesome, because that's how you really get people involved," McDonnell says.

Seasonal's debut EP, *The World We Chose to See*, is available online on Bandcamp, Spotify, iTunes, Amazon Prime Music and other digital streaming services.