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Cheer-Accident

Not so much a band as an ever-changing cast of players, Thymme Jones's musical vehicle delights in messing with rock music convention

By Peter Margasak
Photography by Evan Jenkins

"I think it's amazing that it ever got made, because, gosh, any one of us could have died since then," declares Thymme Jones, talking about Cheer-Accident's latest album *Vacate*. "Mortality is a thing." They had written and sequenced its songs back in 1998, not long before their guitarist and recording engineer Phil Bonnet died suddenly from a brain aneurysm in February 1999. "Honestly, I don't know how quickly we would have made it even if Phil hadn't died." The Chicago band has called the recording their easy listening album, but more accurately, it's a homage to the late composer Burt Bacharach and his penchant for unpredictable melodic shapes and chromaticism.

Cheer-Accident were in the midst of making their stark, bruising 2000 album *Salad Days* when Jones and Bonnet became so absorbed in a box set of songs by the MOR maestro that they planned what would become *Vacate*. By then, they had already earned a reputation for extreme left turns, following collections of complex, metallic art rock with albums stuffed with piano-driven balladry, cementing a practice of defying expectations that's endured for more than three or four decades, depending on when you recognise as the group's actual genesis.

Jones says it all began on New Year's Day 1981, following a jam session with a couple of friends in the basement of his parents' suburban home in Palatine, Illinois, although the group never actually performed live before 1987. Either way, Cheer-Accident – which took its name from a greeting card category intended to cheer up someone who had suffered an accident – have never operated with much external logic, whether toggling wildly between stylistic approaches or nonchalantly sabotaging commercial opportunities. Nor have they maintained a consistent line-up beyond Jones and guitarist Jeff Libersher, who joined the fold not long after that 1981 jam session. Dozens of musicians have performed and recorded with the band over its lengthy history, but the core of the band has involved a much smaller group of players, more willing to throw themselves into Jones's peculiar universe distinguished by goofy puns, bad taste and often lacerating self-deprecation. There have also been members devoted to the music who couldn't abide by the silliness, whether early bassist Chris Block or later bassist Dan Forden.

Cheer-Accident usually get labelled as a prog rock band, and, indeed, there's no missing the intertwined influence of bands like Genesis, Van Der Graaf Generator and Gentle Giant on their sprawling output, but they've also undercut the seriousness of such music at every turn. From the beginning, Jones refused to draw lines between the most sugary pop and the most complex art rock, and his band's songs have sometimes collided those opposites. The music on *Vacate* largely positions their various experimental impulses in very subtle ways, like the microtonal meltdown in the final seconds of the string arrangement for the gorgeous chamber pop tune "Postmarked". But no single recording can convey the twisted aesthetic of Jones, a peculiar auteur

who's been spending his time writing and recording music on his own and with friends for more than four decades.

"We happened to overlap with what was sort of the post-punk movement in the late 80s and early 90s," says Jones. There was a decidedly dark and heavy vibe to the group's first few albums, where noisy, industrial-flavoured guitars formed a complex matrix of cross-cutting lines, taut polyrhythms and a gloomy worldview.

"Aesthetically, we have a couple of albums that happen to fit right into that: 'Oops, I think we might have invented math rock.' But then we made our first pop album, and alienated half of those people. We could have pushed that. [Chris Block] our bass player at the time and I had a bit of a rift because he thought it would have been worthwhile to stick around in that aesthetic for longer. That's totally valid, and we probably could have done some really interesting things if we didn't all of a sudden do this 180, but Phil and I both felt like it was time to do something more pop."

In 1994 Cheer-Accident released *The Why Album*, and while its notion of pop music is much closer to Genesis than Dionne Warwick, there's no question that the generous, piano-driven melodic sensibility and Jones's impressively tuneful singing suddenly unveiled an interest that had been hiding in plain sight all along.

That album set in motion a path of frequent change, which has become the norm over the last 30 years. "The era I just described was the closest we ever came to having [stylistic shifts] be a conscious thing," Jones continues. "It wasn't like we felt we had to make that statement or something. It was just an opportunistic move. It's like, this would work right now. That's really instinctual. It's pretty improvisatory, actually. I like making the analogy between free improvisation and the arc of what we've done with 26 albums now. This happened and that sets us off in this direction."

For the last two decades the band's output has been released by two very different labels, Cuneiform and Skin Graft. The former imprint is best known as a progressive rock and jazz imprint, releasing music by Present, Richard Pinhas and Hugh Hopper, among others, while the latter cleaves to a snotty, perverse post-punk aesthetic encompassing US Maple, Flying Luttenbachers, and Arab On Radar. Jones pitched several albums to Cuneiform before the label finally dropped *Fear Draws Misfortune* in 2009, but there was always something that turned off label head Steve Feigenbaum, whether the pump organ-vacuum cleaner duet that opens the 1997 album *Enduring The American Dream* or the needling psychodrama "Camp O'Physique" that follows the ambitious 23 minute opening epic "The Autumn Wind Is A Pirate" on the 2003 album *Introducing Lemon*. While it's no longer unusual for rock bands to toggle between wildly disparate styles, few have achieved Cheer-Accident's whiplash leaps or simultaneous ardour and irreverence, which is less a quirk than a dominant personality.

Within that prog-to-pop spectrum the group has delivered pivots that are satisfying musically, and frequently hilarious. The group's 2022 album *Here Comes The Sunset* includes a pitch perfect cover of Cheap Trick's "Dream Police" that conveys

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UNEXPECTED

Cheer-Accident in Chicago, March 2024: (from left) Mike Hagedorn, Alex Perkolup, Laura Boton, Thymme Jones, Jeff Libersher, Ross Feller, Eleanor Schumacher, Cory Bengtsen



a deep love for the original. But suddenly there's an extended variations-on-a-theme passage during the bridge where Cheer-Accident introduces some comically overwrought, prog-heavy excess slyly smothered in growing layers of blown-out distortion until it suddenly snaps back without a hiccup to the chorus and clear fidelity. "[Jones] maintains that they fixed the song for Cheap Trick," remarks drummer Mike Greenlees, who has a long connection with the band. "Like that's clearly where Rick Nielsen would have gone if he wasn't worried about radio airplay."

"Intimacy", the song that opens their 2020 album *Chicago XX* – the title is a goofy salute to the long-running band named after the city, right down to appropriating its trademark logo – opens with needling electric guitars and a punishing beat multitracked by Jones before an incongruous swarm of oboes played by Amelie Morgan sweeps in like a bagpipe orchestra, reflecting a trick borrowed from Charles Ives, where it sounds like a different band have busted into the session. That tune is followed by a gracefully swinging pop tune sung by Carmen Armillas, one of a slew of seriously skilled female singers that Jones has brought into the fold. Such leaps have become part and parcel of their music, and as much as Cheer-Accident might sound like prog rock, Jones has always embraced a progressive aesthetic more than he adheres to prog rock conventions.

Still, none of that explains why the album Cheer-Accident decided to record when the pandemic hit was one they had plotted 25 years ago. "The idea to record and release *Vacate* was always percolating away in the back of our brains, and we knew it would get made at some point," says Libersher with characteristic earnestness. "Several factors influenced the decision to wait a

quarter-century-ish to get this one done, but I think at least some of that had to do with timing and logistics."

For his part Jones simply shrugs. "We have so many plates spinning at any given time, so it's like, oh, let's make this record now. I don't think I can answer why we magically found time to make it." When Bonnet died the group not only lost a guitarist and dear friend, but also their main recording engineer, a role Jones subsequently filled, even if the new record was made in the early days of the pandemic with Steve Albini.

Jones has been an inveterate studio geek for decades. "Thymme was recording stuff and figured out how to do multitrack recording on two cassette decks," says Greenlees, a childhood friend of Jones since the late 1970s who participated in the earliest Cheer-Accident experiments. "He'd bounce the shit back and forth and add stuff to it, which was fun, because they didn't run at the same speed, so he had to keep retuning instruments. He was like, 'Well, I have to do the piano first because I can't retune that.'"

Libersher explains that home recording has enabled the group to compile an extensive vault of tracks. "All of us are constantly working on new things, and the band have certainly amassed quite a sizable catalogue of songs, partial-songs, riffs and good-bad ideas over many years. I'm grateful that one of the many roles Thymme is willing to take on within the band is that of archivist, and he is always sifting through that older stuff and rediscovering or rethinking those strange nuggets and sometimes forgotten gems. Quite often these works-in-progress get interrupted with us having to abruptly switch gears to begin prepping for an upcoming show or tour or recording, but we always know we will eventually get back to working on whatever

it was... it's definitely a plus to have so much potential material available to revisit and flush out when the time is right."

Just as those archives have swelled over the years, so has the extended family of collaborators in Cheer-Accident. Jones is proud of the current version of the band that's held steady for the last few years – with bassist Alex Perkolup, singer Laura Boton and multi-instrumentalists Mike Hagedorn, Eleanor Schumacher, Cory Bengtson and Ross Feller – but over the years countless figures from Chicago's rich music scene have performed, recorded, or co-written songs in the group. "That's one of the reasons I can't move out of Chicago," declares Jones. "It's the most amazing city in the world for music. There is some sort of shared aesthetic going on. There's people that really do appreciate all walks of music. Chicago is like ten different cities. So we're always meeting new people."

While many of those collaborations are fleeting, Jones has cultivated a genuine inclusivity that means many of those folks leave the group only to return. Some musicians are drafted for a particular session or gig, while others become part of a working version of the band. "Thymme stays in contact with absolutely everybody, probably that he's ever played or jammed with," explains Greenlees. "You'll go to a Cheer-Accident show now and you'll see someone on stage that you haven't seen in 30 years."

Greenlees, who co-founded the Chicago post-punk band Tar and has recently been working in a new band called Deep Tunnel Project (with fellow Tar member John Mohr, bassist Tim Midyett of Silkworm, and guitarist Jeff Dean) plays drums on two of *Vacate's* songs. Growing up with Jones, Greenlees was part of the earliest iterations of Cheer-Accident, but apart from a handful of live shows in the late 1990s he'd left the fold long ago. "I feel like he just wanted to include me," he says of the invitation to play on the album. "He's just like, 'Well, I haven't done anything on record with Mike.' He makes people feel involved."

Keyboardist D Bayne meanwhile was part of a quintet version of Cheer-Accident that toured in Europe in 2013, but when the band returned a year later Jones brought along Bay Area keyboardist Evelyn Davis, who's also an excellent singer – the leaner and less costly version of the band meant Bayne wasn't included. "The rug kind of got pulled out from under him in a way," rues Jones.

For his part, Bayne is sanguine. "I was put off at first, but then realised this was part of Thymme's vision, to cycle through band members, circulate, form and reform. The band and its music was constantly changing and evolving." Rather than taking the decision as a rejection, Bayne pivoted by finding other ways to contribute. "I asked Thymme if I could volunteer to write music for the band. I wasn't expecting him to say yes given his disputable reputation for being a control freak, but he wholeheartedly agreed."

Bayne began writing material with Cheer-Accident's long-time lyricist Scott Rutledge – who's been involved in the group for three decades, although he's never performed with them – envisioning the tunes for Carmen Armillas, one of numerous vocalists who've worked with them over the years. "Now, years later, we are close to finishing the upcoming album *Becoming History* featuring Scott's words and Carmen's voice – with Thymme behind each song, producing and recomposing, essentially involved but not obviously centre stage."

The keyboardist was also the driving force behind one of the band's most peculiar albums, *Hong Kong*, a kind of sound-mapping experiment built around field recordings he'd made in the titular city while he was studying there in 2015. Cheer-Accident improvised arrangements around Bayne's carefully edited sequences of environmental sounds. "After listening to the final recordings, Thymme threw me a curve ball. He said something like, 'Does this album have to be a jazz sort of thing?' Meaning was I set on releasing the tracks literally as they were recorded in the studio? I thought about it for a second and said, 'Of course not, what do you have in mind?' And Thymme explained that he wanted to cut up the whole recording session, pull out bits and pieces, chop up tracks and recombine, and play with the relative levels of the field recording versus the improvised parts. It ended up being much more fun, and had a significant resonance with

the history of Hong Kong as a colonial protectorate through independence and now through its assimilation and destruction by China."

"People actually have a lot of freedom in Cheer-Accident to do a lot of different things," reflects Jones. "But it's really hard to convey that because people have such a clear idea about what a band should be, and that whole idea is really boring to me. A band is this entity that gets together twice a week for two and a half hours, and you run the set. Sometimes we're that, when we're preparing for a show or whatever, we can be in that mode. Cheer-Accident didn't start out as a band, and we haven't ended up as a band."

Libersher jokes, "I feel that the band has consistently fostered and openly encouraged an environment where the expression of ideas – musical or otherwise – can and should be tossed into the mix, even though in some instances, you may have found yourself wishing you had brought along your lunch box and your hard hat. But I truly believe that the intent has always been to encourage rather than to discourage. I've always felt that we as a band have welcomed any opportunity for folks to collectively and openly discuss anything, be it musical or otherwise. I also feel that a band that has lasted for this many years needs a leader, and Thymme always has been that guy. We all put a ton of time into this thing, but Thymme is wearing 17 party hats at all times."

Jim O'Rourke first encountered Jones through Illusion Of Safety, the veteran experimental rock band led by Dan Burke, with whom they both played. O'Rourke would later tap Jones to play drums in his shortlived band Brise-Glace. "As a drummer, he's insane," he says. "You could put cardboard boxes in front of him and that sound still comes out. I've seen him play on every sort of drum kit, every collection of percussion, and somehow it always sounds like him. I don't know what it is. He's

"Cheer-Accident didn't start as a band, and we haven't ended up as a band." Thymme Jones

a ridiculously underrated drummer." O'Rourke sees Jones as a strangely magnetic presence in Chicago. "This isn't meant in a bad way, because there's a lot of outcasts in the world. Outcasts are looking for other outcasts in order to survive, on some level. Thymme's very much a contrarian. It's a kind of contrariness that you see in things like *The Residents*. It's a very American kind of stick in the mud contrariness."

That attitude has frequently kept the band in check. When the band played a big prog rock festival in North Carolina in 2009, Jones greeted the crowd by announcing: "This is our first *Star Trek* convention." The band's live performances are legendary for hijinks and pranks that seem designed to test the patience not only of audience members but the members of the group. For one such set, Jones decided to add some tension to a well-rehearsed gig by playing a click track at high volume through the entire performance. *The Why Album* includes a hooky, elegant tune called "Transposition" that Jones liked so much that he sequenced it three consecutive times on the record, a gambit the band has recreated live, right down to identical stage gestures during each part, to the befuddlement of audiences.

"There was a point where we almost stopped doing music altogether," recalls Jones. "[Former guitarist] Dylan Posa would ask these questions: 'OK, so we're really into upsetting the notion of what people are expecting. How about we just don't even do the show? That would be unexpected, right? Just how about we don't show up?' That's how far we took it in the mid-90s. And then I heard Neil Hamburger, and I'm like, 'Oh, he's doing that with comedy. We can just keep doing music. Phew!' That was seriously a pivotal moment for me. I'm like, OK, he's got that covered. We can go back to focusing on melody and rhythm. We fuck with our own expectations. I don't want it to become stagnant, and it hasn't. I'm as passionate about it as I ever have been, and so is Jeff." ● *Cheer-Accident's Vacate is released by Cuneiform Records*