



**Naked Giants**  
***The Shadow***

Seattle's Naked Giants burst onto the national music scene with their 2018 full-length debut, *SLUFF*, a candied and insanely catchy blast of unhinged pop-punk-grunge-surf-rock. But if that record was the sound of, as one reviewer labeled them, a trio of "affable miscreants just out of high school" getting their musical rocks off, then *The Shadow*, the band's new and second studio effort, is in comparison a decidedly more—what's the word?—mature offering.

That is, if "mature" is the appropriate term for an album where one member is credited with playing a fun machine, and another merely with "charisma."

And so, welcome once again to the extraordinary and eccentric world of Naked Giants. They might be older (average age: 23) and wiser, but the band members—singer and guitarist Grant Mullen, singer and bassist Gianni Aiello and drummer Henry LaVallee—are still out to conjure a rip-roaring good time.

In fact, cue up *The Shadow*, and within little more than the first five minutes you've already careened through the throttling "Walk of Doom," a blitz of post-punk riffing, wastoid gang shouting and toms-heavy drumming; the singalong anthem-for-the-disaffected "High School (Don't Like Them)," in which Mullen aloofly intones of former classmates, "Now you're lying on the couch and life's busted / Never made a big sting or erupted" over waves of ratty, distorted chords; and the taut, falsetto-flecked "Take a Chance," a Talking Heads-ish funk-rock workout with bits of shimmering synth and lo-fi slide guitar riffing thrown in for good measure.

"It's all about how many smiles can we crack on the people that are listening to this music," LaVallee says by way of something like a mission statement. "And also on the people that are playing it."

And to be sure, *The Shadow* is an energetic and exhilarating musical rollercoaster ride. But there's also a whole lot more to it.

Take, for starters, "Turns Blue," an '80s-tinged dream-pop torch song that floats along on an undulating bass line and heavily reverberated dew-drop guitars before erupting in a soft explosion of pounding drums and harmonized *na-na-na*'s in the chorus.

Or “The Ripper,” a slice of mellowed-out, dark-toned psych-folk that, in lines like “wash me away ‘til my color’s gone,” explores, as songwriter Aiello puts it, the “effects of Western cultural domination and colonization attitudes from the large scale onto the small scale” (even if, LaVallee admits with a slight laugh, he interpreted those same lyrics as being about “ripping bong hits”).

Subject matter aside, the point, of course, is that *The Shadow* reveals new and welcome layers to the Naked Giants sound, both musically and lyrically. For every anthem like the wiry, slamming “(God Damn!) What I Am” (“I’m feeling all right / I’ve got my band and my song is playing all night”), there’s a “heartfelt acoustic ballad” (LaVallee’s words) like “Song for When You Sleep,” a junkyard-blues workout like “Better Not Waste My Time” and a socially-conscious new-wave jam like “Television,” where over a loopy, hypnotic groove Aiello laments, “Eighteen, nineteen dead this week / But have you seen this fucking meme?”

And yet, for all its wide-ranging sounds, *The Shadow* is also an extremely focused set. Credit this in part to producer Chris Funk, who got the band out of their Seattle hometown to work closely with him at his own Halfling Studios in Portland, Oregon.

“We were pretty much isolated there for two weeks, which was different from *SLUFF*, where we were recording in Seattle and going back and forth from our homes to the studio,” recalls Mullen of working with the Decemberists multi-instrumentalist. “This time, we were totally immersed in the process.”

And what did Funk bring to the proceedings?

“A lot,” says LaVallee. “I don’t know if you’ve seen *Game of Thrones*, but there’s this one character who’s, like, Stannis’s guide, and he kind of looks like Chris Funk. I told Chris, ‘You’re kind of like that guy—an older warrior who’s seen the road,’ you know?”

Mullen picks up the thread, offering some clarity in the process. “Chris is such a creative guy, and such a musician himself, that it felt more like we were working with another songwriter and collaborator as opposed to just a producer,” he says. “He was guiding the project, but he was also just enjoying himself. So the sessions had a real nice and easy flow. We were all very inspired the entire time.”

Regarding the variety and depth of the music on *The Shadow*, Mullen continues, “We realized we didn’t have to immediately go to ten on every song, which is what we may have done in the past.” Rather, he says, “we were able to lay back and focus more on the details of the music as opposed to just writing the catchiest, most energetic things we can think of.”

As for what led to this development?

“It’s life experience, and the sort of conscious awareness that comes with that growth,” Aiello says.

Much of that experience and conscious awareness came courtesy of the band’s exhaustive tour schedule over the past year and a half. Naked Giants have always been known as a band that truly comes alive on the stage, and they only further solidified that reputation since the release of *SLUFF*, playing sold-out, sweaty club shows on their own and also hooking up with Car Seat Headrest for a long outing where they pulled double duty as both the opening act and backing band for the Will Toledo-led headliners.

In terms of what they gleaned from the experience, Mullen says, “I think it gave us a perspective on how we want to craft music, and how we want things to actually sound. Because you’re playing the same songs hundreds of times and you’re watching how the crowds respond to them, and a lot of times these are people that have never even heard of you before. It was a valuable lesson.”

And also a fun one.

“It’s so awesome to finish your set, have a 10-minute break and then go out for another one,” LaVallee acknowledges. “Also I’d be a fool not to mention it was a dream-come-true to play at some of those venues in front of big crowds, and to also be a part of the headlining act.”

Which is very different from Naked Giants’ earliest experiences, playing house parties around Seattle when Aiello and Mullen were students at the University of Washington. “The crowds were just crazy 19-year-olds, loving our heavy kind of music,” Mullen says. “I remember a feeling of high risk at every show, because everyone was right up against the band, and there was always some drunk guy stepping on your pedals or bumping into your gear. It definitely influences how you attack the music.”

Aiello concurs. “We kind of got our schtick by being this opening band that was throwing everything we had at the audience. But as our set time started to get longer and as we started playing with Car Seat Headrest, we started to notice the importance of having a little bit of cool-down time. It helps to switch things up instead of always going for it full-on.”

Which brings us back to *The Shadow*, and also to “The Shadow” itself, the epic title track that seems to encapsulate everything great about Naked Giants ca. 2020. It’s a slow-burning behemoth of a song, creeping along on crashing drums, a fuzzed-out, bloated bass line, skronky distorto-chords and acid-freakout guitar squiggles and then building to a massive chorus in which the members chant, almost as an incantation, that they “want to see the shadow.” Halfway though, the song erupts into a Sabbath-damaged, double-time metal chugger, with all three Giants bearing down hard on their respective instruments and bringing the whole thing to a glorious, noisy climax.

And what, exactly, is the Shadow?

“It’s the core of what we’re dealing with on the album, which is facing the darkness,” Mullen says. “It could be your past, or some guilt that you’re holding onto, or an issue in the world around us—it could be anything.”

These are concerns, Aiello adds, like “information overload, social media anxiety, racial injustice, all this terrible shit that people have to deal with and that we as young people are struggling to navigate in our own lives.”

But whatever the particular shadow is, Mullen continues, “it’s about looking it in the face and embracing it, and having the desire to deal with it.”

All that said, LaVallee also adds that “a shadow represents darkness only in the presence of light. So even if there’s this innate darkness, *The Shadow* is also a story of light, and an expression of life.”

And it’s an expression the band looks forward to sending out into the world—and then, hopefully, beaming into each and every audience member’s skull from the stage.

“When we’re playing we always have to give it 100 percent, because otherwise why even bother doing it?” Mullen says. “There’s such a power in making that emotional connection.”

“The way I look at it, people are coming together for the music, and we’re the conduits,” adds Aiello. “And sometimes people are going through something amazing, and sometimes they’re going through something terrible. You have to be aware of the energy in a space and give the people what they want and let them have a good time.”

It’s a credo that LaVallee describes as “setting fire to the darkness.”

“Like, ‘Let’s get some flood lights on all these dark places in our audience’s lives and our own lives,’ ” he says, then laughs. “Let’s illuminate all of it and let’s flush out that darkness—with the power of rock!”