

Toys That Kill

Toys That Kill come from San Pedro, California, the city where the freeway ends, where bullets fall from the sky on the fourth of July and where Mike Watt painted the name of his hometown on his bass and everybody started calling him "Pedro." This is album four but year twelve of the band, and probably year twenty-something for Toys singer/guitarist and Recess Records founder Todd Congelliere, and while it wouldn't fit his genre or his personality to start chucking around words like "expert," To... odd and Toys have exactly figured out how to make a couple chords and a chorus timeless in a way that's old and new all at once.

Congelliere was at the core of F.Y.P, the band he started basically with the lowest-budget drum machine and four-track recorder legally available in 1989 after sudden and intense exposure to punk by fellow skaters who'd come by to use his ramp and bring mixtapes for the boombox. ("Black Flag, Dead Kennedys, 7 Seconds, the Germs, Descendents-if it wasn't for those bands, not only would we not sound like this, I probably wouldn't be involved with music," he says now. "I've always hated normal musicians and these bands were nothing like that.").

When he started F.Y.P, it was hardcore, but in the loosest sense - fast, pissed, aimed squarely against a world of teachers and cops and full-of-themselves idiots. But there was more going on, too - Minutemenstyle wordcram and Descendents-esque melody snarled together with pitch-dark humor and strangely sentimental sarcasm, and by the summer of 2000, it was obvious that the band called F.Y.P was ready to become something else. So naturally, they did, playing the last F.Y.P show for hundreds of proud screaming weirdos in a cavernous bar in the Inland Empire and debuting the new deal at a since-bulldozed punk club in the shadow of the Port of Los Angeles the very next night. And so - the same way the Descendents changed into All-began the mighty Toys That Kill.

If you were there, you could tell this band was everything ex-F.Y.P-ers Congelliere and Sean Cole (now twinning Congelliere on guitar and vocals) had been saving up since ever. These were gigantic songs with choruses as heart-stopping as the Clash and a rhythm section - bassist Chachi Ferrara, drummer Denis Fleps - so heavy it sank further into the stage every time the drums kicked in. (This is called the "TTK thump," says Congelliere.) Toys had pop songs but pop songs broken at the edges, rock 'n' roll songs but rock 'n' roll songs with all the pose and pretension dissolved away, punk songs but punk songs that weren't ever gonna burn out and crumble away. And so Toys That Kill revealed themselves as a band that could translate Thin Lizzy and The Buzzcocks, Cheap Trick and The Descendents, The Replacements and The Who and Elvis Costello and The Ramones all down to the same simple things-energy, guitar and heart. Famby 42 comes after a six-year... not really a break, since Cole and Congelliere each were up front in their own bands and playing in friends' bands and delivering the world the Underground Railroad to Candyland, Stoned at Heart and That's Incredible!, which you should you should go grab (preferably on cassette!) as soon as you're done with this album. But Toys returns rested and ready with an album recorded in Congelliere's home-built Clown Sound studio, steady and strong on probably its most potent line-up, built around longtime drummer Jimmy, who Congelliere calls one of his best finds ever: "F.Y.P always had rotating members so I never take for granted how long we have been able to play together," he says. "Especially since it always seems new and fresh. I've never had chemistry with anyone quite like this."

And after 12 years, they've turned this into some kind of science. There's a chord change in "Nervous Rocks" or "Freddie And His Mother" that's a Toys That Kill signature, where the song bends in a way you don't expect and barrels right through the center of you. There's a beat on "V Chip" or "I've Been Stabbed" that just about breaks the song in half. There are those melodies on "Waltz One Million" and "Fambly" that don't ever want to go where you predict they're going to go. And there's the slow-motion grand finale of "Clap For Alaska," which unravels from a barely there guitar pattern into a high-power heartbroke anthem: "I know if I come back down, they're gonna get me!" It's fifteen tracks but also fifteen snapshots of a band that's become the best kind of machine - of four musicians who know they can trust each other, and that all they gotta do now is fight for the song. If there's a key to what Toys do so well and have done for so long, that's it: "It shouldn't be a lost concept but that's what everyone should aim for - making the song work," says Congelliere. "Anything else will ruin it. less