

Waiting for CD to take shape is an anxious time for G. Love

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Gazette Reporter

"It's definitely a time when, as an artist, I feel the need to speak up," says singer G. Love.



G. Love is on a plane, held up on the tarmac in Boston en route to his Philadelphia hometown. Boston is where his family is these days, he points out in a cellphone interview last week. But Philly is where he owns a home, where his recording studio is. So these times on the plane between the two cities is becoming more common.

As he and his band, Special Sauce, wrap up work on his latest, as-yet-untitled album, the singer/guitarist, real name Garrett Dutton, intimates that it's a tough time; it's always tough for him at this point in the creative process. To date, he and his three-piece band – Jim Prescott (upright bass), Jeff Clemens (drums) and Mark Boyce (keys) – have laid down 22 tracks. Now, all those songs are in the hands of G. Love's label, Brushfire Records, and he's awaiting feedback. Plus, he has the daunting task of figuring out which 12 tracks will end up on the summer release.

"I just spent all these glorious months pouring my heart and soul into it, and the band has too," he said. "You get into the thing where you know the label is listening to it, and radio people are listening to it and your manager, everybody who works with you. It's just kind of a tough time where I get the most critical

critique right now. It's kind of overwhelming at times. I think of a song as a kid, you know. And you have to let him out into the world. If he's a [expletive] up, you still love him. If he's a champion, then you're really proud. You just hope that one of these songs is going to be a champion and not too many of them are going to be [expletive] ups."

Just under the radar

G. Love and Special Sauce came out of Philly in the early 1990s. Not long after forming – initially as a trio – the band landed a major label deal with Epic, which released the self-titled debut in 1994. There was some immediate success thanks in part to the minor MTV hit video for “Cold Beverage,” which highlighted the band’s laid-back, party-time vibe. It was infectious. The album almost went gold.

While G. Love’s loose, almost shambolic amalgam of blues and hip-hop showed more maturity on the 1995 follow-up “Coast to Coast Motel,” the album didn’t sell as well. And the same can be said for subsequent albums, as Special Sauce earned more of a reputation as a just-under-the-radar outfit – a band that plays well both on college radio and the jam band circuit.

Despite the devoted, sizable fan base and the 1 million-plus album sales over the years, there have been a few critical dings over the years as well. Reviewing the Jones Beach stop of the H.O.R.D.E. tour in 1995, New York Times music critic Jon Pareles wrote that “Mr. Love’s . . . mush-mouthed vocals had the overtones of minstrelsy” – a criticism that a young white man in the dicey position of singing black American forms can easily attract. Nine years later, Pareles’ feelings hadn’t abated. He called G. Love and company an “irritating blues-rap mockery.”

Nonetheless, there are critics who disagree. For one, a 2006 Daily Gazette review of a G. Love and Special Sauce performance at the Gathering of the Vibes jam band festival in Mariaville pointed out that the band’s eclecticism never seems contrived (full disclosure: I wrote that).

Building credibility

That eclecticism, however, seems to have gotten more focused over the years. There are still the elements of blues, hip-hop, alt-rock, funk and classic Philly soul. But G. Love is getting plenty of street cred over time for growing more cohesive after at least one downright scattered – yet ambitious – effort in 2001's "Electric Mile." Released in 2006, "Lemonade," the latest one, was arguably the band's most cohesive and fully realized yet.

Now in their 30s and on Jack Johnson's indie Brushfire Records, the members of Special Sauce have also added a member in Mark Boyce, an organ player and keyboardist who has been helping fill out the sound going on two years now.

"We've been opening for bigger guys like Dave [Matthews] for years as a trio," G. Love said. "And I've always thought it was so hard to get what we do in a club, where everything is so up close, across at a big outdoor venue. The energy that works at a club doesn't necessarily work on the big stage. So we went with Mark."

These days, the changes with the coming album might just solely center on G. Love's lyrical content, which he says has taken a turn toward the political. While it's not clear how the album will shape up once it's edited from 22 to perhaps 12 songs, he did say the party vibe will remain. However, he's struggling with what the lyrical tone will be once the album is complete. A great admirer of Bob Marley, he said he strived to have great, catchy songs that also had a political weight. But still, he's questioning himself and questioning what messages are vital.

"When the record comes out," he said, "the election will be right around the corner. And then there's the war in Iraq and all the other problems around the world. It's definitely a time when, as an artist, I feel the need to speak up about this. But now that I've gotten all this off my chest [with those 22 songs], I have to decide what's the stuff people really want to listen to."

Big family

Meanwhile, a lot has been made of the relationships among the players in the band. After last year's concert DVD "A Year and a Night with G. Love and Special Sauce," there were questions about how much these guys really like each other. It seemed obvious that, despite playing together for more than a decade, they weren't all that close. At the same time, it's obvious that any animosity melts once on stage as the four gel into a cohesive, inspired unit.

"There are definitely a lot of great moments," he said. "But everyone is a quirky character. You know, whatever – you're closer to some people than you are to others. But I think all in all, there's a lot of camaraderie on our tour bus. And it's a big family, whether we're singing 'The Sound of Music' or telling each other to [expletive] off. It depends on what time of day it is."

At this point, G. Love, still sitting on the tarmac, is competing with the pilot's announcement, the one about turning off cellphones and other electronic devices before takeoff.

"Jim's the only one who I think is intrinsically unhappy on tour," he added. "I know he loves the music. But some people just don't like leaving home every three weeks for a month.

"Yo, I gotta go. They're telling me to turn this thing off. Sorry, man."

G. Love and Special Sauce

Where: Revolution Hall, 425 River St., Troy

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

How Much: \$20

More Info: 274-0553, www.revolutionhall.com