

# NINE To Watch In

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**Musicians flock to Austin from around the world with one goal:** to make it and, hopefully, make it big. Many don't, unplugging amps and packing away guitars after a few Sixth Street gigs. But sometimes a band stands out from the crowd. Last year, we told you about The Black Angels, who have since played the main stage at Fun Fun Fun Fest, and The Octopus Project, which landed a big show at Lollapalooza. Now we bring you the nine bands to keep your eye on in '09.

LEFT TO RIGHT: John Aldridge, Scott Butler, Billy Potts and Landon Thompson



# 1 The Black and White Years

By John Cartwright

**BEING A ROCK STAR SHOULDN'T MEAN COMPROMISING ARTISTIC VISION.** Sure, you have to make some sacrifices along the road to stardom, but in the end, if you stick to what you know, the music rocks. Austin's The Black and White Years had a vision, stuck to it and are now sitting on the edge of next-big-thingdom.

Their self-titled debut album has drawn inevitable comparisons to the Talking Heads, which is appropriate. Former Talking Heads keyboardist Jerry Harrison heard the guys playing a 2007 SXSW showcase, and he liked them so much he invited them to California to record.

"I think they're immensely talented," Harrison says. "I think Scott [Butler] is one of the more clever lyricists to come along in a long time."

Cuts like "Power to Change" and "A Wetter Sea" are particularly Heads-esque, with Butler singing, "Put your hand in the water/ put your hand in the water, then take it out." You can hear him channeling David Byrne.

"It's not that we were actively pursuing the Talking Heads, but it makes sense for us," says Butler. "I have that kind of talky feel to my vocals anyway, and it just kind of came out."

Butler's backed by Landon Thompson (guitar/synthesizers), John Aldridge (bass) and drummer Billy Potts. Before Potts, the guys used a synthesizer and drum machine to give the band its new-wave/funk/pop/dance vibe. But Harrison, aiming for more of a rock sound, invited drummer Steve Ferrone (who's played with everyone from Eric Clapton to Duran Duran and Tom Petty's Heartbreakers) to play with them.

"Steve Ferrone is one of the finest studio drummers I've ever worked with, and everything went great," Harrison says. "But there were some places where the live feel sort of took something away from what they had done with drum machines."

The band lost the keyboard elements that gave the guys the quirky sound they loved so much, Butler says. "It just sounded so wrong." So they re-recorded with a drum machine over the live drum track. "'Power to Change' was [originally] so bad that I was not going to release it," Butler says about the song that's gotten them national airplay. "Now I'm really glad we did. I don't think everybody was 100 percent happy with the album," Butler adds. "I know I wasn't 100 percent and Jerry wasn't 100 percent. It's somewhere in between, and I think it sounds interesting for a lot of people." Potts now plays their live shows, but the synth and drum machine are there, too.

In two years, the band's stock has risen exponentially. The guys became a surprise hit at Cannes' MIDEM Conference (an even bigger version of SXSW), released an album that garnered national buzz, opened for Mayor Will Wynn's 2008 SXSW launch party, landed a Saturday gig at the Austin City Limits Music Festival (it was a noon slot, but still ...) and grew some of the furriest mustaches seen onstage in Austin.

With just about all of the major labels showing interest, another SXSW slot lined up and plans to return to the studio in 2009, the guys in The Black and White Years could soon be showing the fruit of the principled seeds they've been planting—as long as they can keep growing it their way.