

## POPPIES

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Jones Beach is a tiny bar and performance space located in the heart of Bushwick. Longways, it could hold around twenty people, baristas and bartenders included. There is a large glass window that looks out onto Stuyvesant Avenue, and the streetlights cast a golden glow onto the interior's bright orange tables and cream colored walls. Jones is the kind of place that you really have to be on the lookout for; it is one that I get mildly lost trying to find. Though it is a Tuesday night, the downtown strip is bustling. The subway rattles overhead, a man blasts Barry White through a loudspeaker, and people roam to and fro amongst the weekday nightlife that Brooklyn has to offer. It is a scene that May Rio and Ian Langehough, two members of the rock band Poppies, know well.

“When I was in high school, I would come into this area specifically to come see shows,” Ian, a native East Coaster, says. The three of us sit in a corner spot, huddled around my cell phone and makeshift recorder. “It’s funny how when you’re at that age, this area seems crazy dangerous and new. It’s cool being here now.”

I feel young compared to the two of them, though May and Ian are only a couple of years older than I am. They weren’t much older when they met each other, either – through old roommates – along with their drummer Ajax Abernathy and bassist Glenn Gallegan. In a city practically oozing with rock n’ roll history, most venues from Williamsburg to Gramercy Park encapsulating some kind of story, it is only fitting that Poppies would make it their place to be as well. “I was nearly done with college when I realized I wanted to play music,” May speaks with a smile. “I moved here wanting to be in a band more than anything.”

One EP and album into their career, Poppies is swiftly blooming into a group whose sound is an intriguing challenge to pinpoint. They are a little bit of everything: bedroom rock that you can play as you wind down for the evening, soft grunge that you can bang your head to. *Good*, their first EP released in 2017, brought the lo-fi of 90’s Seattle and a hint of modern alt. The band, however, is always, unmistakably, themselves. *Bed Music*, their first “full length” LP, was released in early 2019. Rio describes it as a “mini-album,” just a little over fifteen minutes long, yet still packed with the subtle grit that seems to follow Poppies everywhere. Within seconds, listeners are whisked into a world of soft-tuned guitars, whispered vocals, and a kind of songwriting that feels as intimate as if you were in the recording studio yourself.

“That was a learning process, figuring that [album] out, because I had to unlearn my control-freaky kind of tendencies,” Ian admits. *Bed Music* integrated a different production route,

with Ian playing bass on every track, and songs performed in sections instead of live. The writing process also provided a new perspective. “I like the idea of not being formulaic in songwriting and approaching it in a different way every time,” he continues. “It just makes for unpredictable, better results.”

Though *Good* was Poppies’ official debut, their repertoire feels like a continually progressing introduction into who this band really is, which is part of the pleasure of listening to them. Songs subjective to the warpedness of childhood (“Devin”) or the strangeness of growing older (“Dog Years”) set it apart from *Bed Music*, which feels like an insider’s look into being a human today. While keeping true to the age of anxiety, there is a perceptiveness to the uncertainties of love, hope, and other people’s views of ourselves.

“[*Bed Music*] had a very specific sort of vibe,” Rio says. “[There was] a rough period of time that we went through, but it’s never like we have a chalkboard and write out the themes. It just kind of happens.”

That fluidity goes hand in hand with New York DIY. Poppies embrace the scene with open arms, having compiled a long list of shows at neighborhood venues like Trans Pecos and Alphaville. They have shared stages with bands like Pom Pom Squad and Goodbye Honolulu. Time away on various tours around the East Coast makes home – and the home made within the people and community there – something to latch onto.

“There’s no one specific flavor to a lot of the music here,” Ian says.

With venues like Death by Audio and 285 Kent having closed their doors over the years, and the even more recent shut-down of the beloved Glove, the scene could be viewed as flailing. A tight knit community that emphasizes a physical experience, a safe space to enjoy music, feels more dire today than ever. These local bands are the ones leading the way. In an ever growing melting pot of artists, Poppies are a group to hold on to.

They realize, though, they aren’t the only ones.

“We’re sort of in this renaissance of all these cool new venues opening up that I’m really excited about,” says May. “It’s sad when things go, but there’s always a new thing coming. I’m constantly blown away by the bands that I get to go see and bands that are my friends. It’s so cool to be that impressed by your peers.”

“I think that’s all pretty specific to this place,” Ian says.

As the night continues on, our conversation does too. We dish out our favorite releases of the decade. Ian is partial to Chandra’s *Transportation EPs* and Purple Mountains’ self-titled album,

following the death of David Berman. May recently got into Neil Young and has had him on repeat. 2020 is set to only bring bigger and better things.

“We’re really close to being done with a real full length,” says May. “I think I can speak for everyone that we are all really excited about this album.”

It is a comforting thought to hear. I hold it close as I step back onto the street after we say our goodbyes, letting May and Ian get onto a late night rehearsal. I’m rejuvenated and hopeful for a scene I am still trying to learn about and immerse myself in. Whether it is the creative freedom that comes with artistic growth or the continually evolving place that Poppies call home, their sound is becoming signature to a time and place. As I make the half hour trek back towards my home in Clinton Hill, I realize bands like them are so integral in keeping it alive.

“I don’t think [New York DIY] will ever really die, honestly,” May admits, her words ringing as honest as they come. “As long as there are people who are enthusiastic about music, it’s gonna be a thing.”