

Slow and Steady: Tortoise

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WHETHER BECAUSE OF egos or "artistic differences," it is a rare for a band to be able to celebrate its 10th anniversary — let alone its 20th. In the case of the instrumental rock group *Tortoise*, however, the roll of its game has been slow and steady for two decades, even if it seemed like the band had disappeared for a time.

"We were always busy. It didn't feel like that long of a break," said drummer and multi-instrumentalist [John McEntire](#) about the five years between 2004's *"It's All Around You"* and 2009's *"Beacons of Ancestorship."* "It was weird to realize that it was five years because we've been working the whole time."

Band members McEntire, **Dan Bitney**, **Doug McCombs**, **Jeff Parker** and **John Herndon** play in a slew of side projects in Chicago's thriving underground rock world and its experimental jazz scene — a nexus that also describes the sound of *Tortoise*.

Tortoise started putting material together for the album in 2006, but the musical collective's lengthy, twisty tunes require a lot of discussion.

"Once we get focused and determined about how we're going to do something," McEntire said, "it really doesn't take that long. It's the process of finding a starting point, getting everybody's ideas together, sorting through them and figuring out what's going to work; that's what really takes a long time."

"Beacons" may have taken a few years to polish, but with a tour rallying Tortoise back into rhythm — the band plays the Black Cat on Feb. 16 — McEntire believes the next album will come sooner rather than later.

"I'd love for us to have something out in 2011," he said, "and I don't think that's wishful thinking. I think that's entirely doable."

McEntire spoke to Express from his home in Chicago about the **Thrill Jockey** group's latest effort and how the band has managed to maintain its longevity.



» **EXPRESS:** How does "Beacons of Ancestorship" vary from past efforts?

» **MCENTIRE:** That's sort of a tough one. I think one of the things that we wanted to do with the record is get it to a point where it just felt really direct and kind of vital. We knew that we wanted to let go of some of the things that have become sort of trademarks like the mallet percussion and things like that. [We wanted] to change it up and to bring in some new sounds that were a little bit more raw.

» **EXPRESS:** You guys have a lot of side projects that you work with, did you have to switch into a Tortoise kind of mindset after so long?

» **MCENTIRE:** Not really. No.

» **EXPRESS:** What do you get out of playing with Tortoise that you might not with your other projects?

» **MCENTIRE:** Everything's different, every project you're involved in. And I feel like the five of us have such a great sort of chemistry and it's like even if there was one member that was different, it would be a completely different scenario. You learn to appreciate the subtleties that go on between each other. It's hard to talk about in specific terms what that would be, but it's huge. It's great.

» **EXPRESS:** What do you think is the key behind keeping a band together and cohesive for so long?

» **MCENTIRE:** Like I said before, I think it's just the chemistry between the five of us. We all get along great, we never argue about anything. Our creative impulses are generally in sync and that's about it. You know, it's kind of the most you can ask for in a situation like that really.

» **EXPRESS:** So you got lucky?

» **MCENTIRE:** Absolutely.

» **EXPRESS:** And after so long, do interviews get old?

» **MCENTIRE:** *[Laughs]* I'm not a huge fan of the interview. But, it's fine. It's always good to chat.

» *Black Cat, 1811 14th St. NW; with Disappears, Tue., Feb. 16, 8 p.m., \$15; 202-667-4490. (U St.-Cardozo)*

Written by Express contributor by Topher Forhecz



Photos courtesy Thrill Jockey Records

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» **EXPRESS:** The new album has a lot of electronic sounds on it; how did that work itself into the material?

» **MCENTIRE:** Johnny [Herndon] in particular, he does most of his demos in **Ableton Live** and there are a couple things that came kind of directly from that. **Dan [Bitney]** and Johnny and I, when we write, we tend to write on keyboards rather than guitars, and that's kind of why we ended up with a more synth-heavy focus on things.

» **EXPRESS:** I've heard the title "jamtronica" thrown around a lot recently, and I wouldn't call you guys that, but do you think that is something that is rising in prominence — that electronic kind of sound?

» **MCENTIRE:** To be honest with you, I have no idea. I'm a bit out of touch at the minute, you know? What's an example of a jamtronica band? **Sound Tribe Sector 9?**



» **EXPRESS:** Yeah. **The Disco Biscuits**, **Sound Tribe Sector 9**, stuff like that. You guys play at festivals so you've probably seen a little bit of that, though I know you tend toward jazz festivals as well.

» **MCENTIRE:** We do all kinds of different things. I think I know what you're talking about now and I don't know. As you may be aware, we try to avoid labels as much as possible — and that one in particular is particularly heinous I think.

» **EXPRESS:** Well, speaking of genre titles, Tortoise gets credited a lot with being big in the creation of post-rock, does that phrase really mean anything to you?

» **MCENTIRE:** Not really, no.