

Artist Profile: Romance of Thieves

Photo c. James Fannucci

It would be an understatement to call Nick Martin a perfectionist. During a pre-gig rehearsal in a crowded, dimly lit room at San Francisco's Lennon Studios, Martin, leader of R&B ensemble Romance of Thieves, is dissatisfied, and he has the horn section squarely in his sights. "You guys don't have your shit down!" shouts Martin, 16. "Paul's only been in the band five days, and he knows his shit better than either of you guys!" He gestures towards newly recruited bassist Paul Mallari, who watches while noodling nervously on his bass.



The horn section, comprising brothers Jonah (trumpet) and Aaron (saxophone) Baker-McCann, seems a bit puzzled. They're not getting things quite right, but neither can figure out what they're doing wrong, and Martin doesn't seem inclined to give much in the way of direction. The other band members choose not to intervene. They recognize Martin's leadership and implicitly understand that he may be the only guy in the room who knows what the horn part is supposed to sound like.

The tension mounts, and within about ten seconds, Martin and Jonah Baker-McCann are in the midst of a shouting match, which mixes with the other band members' noodling to create an unbearably awkward cacophony. Jonah threatens to quit; Martin ignores his threats. Finally, Jonah packs up his trumpet and walks right out the door.

Slumped against the wall, Martin is clearly frustrated. Within a matter of hours, Romance of Thieves will be competing against seven much older bands in the semi-finals of Gorilla Productions' Battle of the Bands at the DNA Lounge. The prize, in addition to a hefty cash sum, is the submission of a demo tape to several of the biggest record labels in the world, and as Martin is heart-attack serious about pursuing a full-time career in music, this opportunity could be step one in his plan for world domination. His frustration is today compounded by the fact half the band (including the drummer and the guitarist) still hasn't arrived for this pre-gig rehearsal, and that the four backing vocalists are still learning their ridiculously complex harmonies at the very last minute.

While Martin stews, Baker-McCann sits outside the studio at the base of a streetlamp, staring down the seedy South of Market alley where Lennon Studios is located. A few band members are already by his side, either sympathizing with his plight or trying to convince him to come back inside the studio and give it another go. "I'm gonna quit," Baker-McCann mutters. "Actually, I'm gonna go back inside, hit him in the face, and then quit."

The arrival of the rest of the band seems to calm things down. Martin is clearly pissed at their tardiness, but the full band sets up quickly, and the activity defuses the situation. Martin goes outside and convinces Baker-McCann to return, and the trumpeter picks up his instrument and walks inside with everyone else. Martin's nerves settle for the

moment, and as the rhythm section lays down a groove, he is smiling and clapping his hands, thoroughly enjoying his work.

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Romance of Thieves has existed in multiple incarnations under Martin's leadership, and it's best described as a sort of unofficial supergroup of young Bay Area talent. Numerous Romance members in the studio that day are part of other groups. Bassist Mallari plays with psych-rockers Analog Days; keyboardist Jake Barrett regularly performs with Handshake; and second keyboardist Manny Berry is a member of Souled Out. Not present today are rapper EaSWay, an established artist with his backing band, and guitarist Julian Diamond, who has performed with high-profile cover band Have You Seen My Toothbrush?

Martin's story bears some similarity to the classic soul-singer genesis tale, albeit updated for an Anglo denizen of the Internet age. He began singing in the Grace Cathedral Men & Boys' Choir at age nine while simultaneously taking saxophone and piano lessons. He later studied jazz and funk before settling on R&B/soul music as his main genre. In 2008, he joined a trio called Akustiq, which later added more members and changed its name to The St. Valentine. Meanwhile, his solo recordings as Romance of Thieves, in particular the single "Far Away," attracted the notice of blogs such as youthradio.org as well as this one. Martin left the St. Valentine earlier this year to focus on Romance of Thieves, and the two bands are fierce rivals, often competing against one another in battles of the bands. They won't go head-to-head tonight (the Valentine had to cancel their scheduled performance due to lack of personnel), but Martin aims to win and score some bragging rights.

Romance of Thieves sold more advance tickets than any of the competing bands and will thus appear last. They are also the youngest of the eight bands competing, though many of the members are experienced performers with as many gigs under their belt as the adults on tonight's bill. The other competitors are lounge-poppers Sugar Water Purple; nu-metallers Vent; screamo outfit Lambs Become Lions; hard rockers Kings & Crooks; rock n' soul act Tunestone; guitar-rapper duo Day/Four; and industrial-noise group Flesh Weapon.

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After a bit of confusion concerning who was riding in whose car (understandable as there were only three cars for seventeen people, including myself and two friends of the band), I was able to snag a ride to the DNA Lounge with drummer LJ Alexander. The show started at 5:30, and the audience at that hour was small -- somewhere between 40 and 50. (The chief benefit of selling all those advance tickets, and getting to perform near the end of the competition, is that the crowd swells throughout the evening.) As being on the deserted floor was a bit awkward, I watched the bands from the balcony. The Romance members invited me to walk the neighborhood with them during some of the earlier bands' sets. They needed to keep moving to settle their nerves, and I was eager for the chance to catch their group dynamic offstage. For some reason, we all ended up at a nearby Bed, Bath & Beyond, where conversation turned to the myriad possibilities of owning a water carbonator, and everyone took turns sticking their fingers through a Dyson bladeless fan. I spent most of the walk talking to keyboard-player Barrett, who regaled me with tales of his pal who, under the influence of salvia, became temporarily convinced he was a fencepost. "He was just standing

there next to a fence and was like, 'I can't move!' We were like, 'Why not?' and he was like, 'Because I'm made of wood, man!'"

We returned to the venue in time to catch two bands before Romance of Thieves was scheduled to take the stage. Soon, it was time to set up, and things did not proceed smoothly. The band took nearly a half-hour to set up and get the volume levels right, and when they finally began playing, the vocals overpowered everything else, requiring still more adjustments. But in spite of the unprofessional start, the band's performance was electrifying. They began with a high-energy cover of the Flo Rida/David Guetta collaboration "Club Can't Handle Me," which found Martin crooning like Marc Bolan at his raunchiest and rapper De'Andre Wright spitting machine-gun rhymes into the mic. They followed up with several originals: the funky "Changes," on which Martin got out a saxophone and played a solo while sitting on the edge of the stage; the R&B rave-ups "Throw Your Hands Up" and "Tonight;" and somewhat ill-advised mash-up of their excellent single "Luv'n It" with the disturbingly similar McDonald's jingle. The grand finale came in the form of the cannon-fire "Superhuman," co-written with the St. Valentine's Will Randolph, in which Martin referenced virtually every song in the Katy Perry oeuvre while Wright rapped faster and faster (much of it freestyled) until the final chorus. It was a short set in light of the time it had taken them to set up, but it was effective and certainly the most musically satisfying among the bands I'd heard that night.

Finally: the judging. The judge, a polite-looking lady who seemed to struggle a bit while introducing groups with names like "Flesh Weapon," supervised the process of ranking the bands based on the volume of audience applause when their names were called. Sugar Water Purple and Vent received virtually no applause, not necessarily because they sucked but because they had gone on stage early and nearly all their fans had left already. Lambs Become Lions' name was met with boisterous hooting from their followers. (No surprise -- metal fans are loud.) I was somewhat on edge, seeing as Martin would all but blow up the venue with TNT if Romance didn't win. But when the yelling and stomping subsided, Day/Four and Romance of Thieves were tied for first and advanced to the next round. The winning bands danced around like maniacs and exchanged hugs (in Romance's case) and bro-fists (in Day/Four's case) with their friends and fans.

For all of his disagreements with his band, Martin is extremely happy to be working with his current crew. "I love each and every one of them, and it makes me so happy to perform with them," he says. "I was thinking about getting some other people to perform in the [upcoming] finals, but I love these guys too much." However, he was not entirely satisfied with his personal performance. "I had tonsillitis, so I was hurting and cracked the high note," he said. "I struggle every day with how my voice sounds."

Martin knows it takes a lot of work, forward thinking, and luck to break out of the crowd in the pop universe. "I already started working on the finals setlist before the round one battle even began," he says. But Martin is thinking a lot further ahead than that. He's gunning for a successful career in the music world and is focusing just as much on promoting himself as he is on perfecting his art. He says, "Other people say, 'Don't do pop! It's boring and lacks musicality. At best, you're going to be another one-hit wonder and no one will know who you are after 5 minutes in the spotlight.'" Martin aims to prove them wrong. "I'll say, 'No, screw that. I'm going to play the game, and I'm going to play it well, better than anyone has ever played it.' That's why we'll win in September." If he doesn't, it won't be for lack of ambition and vision. "I want this. It's my dream, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get to where I want to be."