

# 16 FOR '16: THE UP-AND-COMING METRO PHOENIX BANDS TO WATCH THIS YEAR

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Couples Fight

Jim Louvau

*The new year means new beginnings, fresh ideas, and more chances to give birth to new projects. In such a populous area, we are privy to a tremendous amount of ambition and diversity when it comes to the local music scene. The area's creative class constantly churns out new music. The city overflows with talent, from bands with members not old enough to drink to veterans with decades of music experience in the scene.*

*With that in mind, we present to you 16 promising local bands to watch in 2016. These bands span a range of genres, from noisy punk to electro pop to surf-tinged garage rock, but they all share a common drive to create great music and share it with the world. Don't be surprised to see these bands popping up on lineups at venues around town and filling out the local slots once festival season hits.*

*Give these bands a listen. We don't think you'll be disappointed.*





Molly and the Molluscs

Dani Perez

### Molly and the Molluscs

These band members are having a better time than you.

At least that's the sense you get listening to their charming debut EP, released last fall on cassette by the 600 Collective and streaming now on SoundCloud. You can hear the joy in the group's fuzzy, exuberant pop songs, and then there's the off-the-cuff laughter that starts them, left in to great effect.

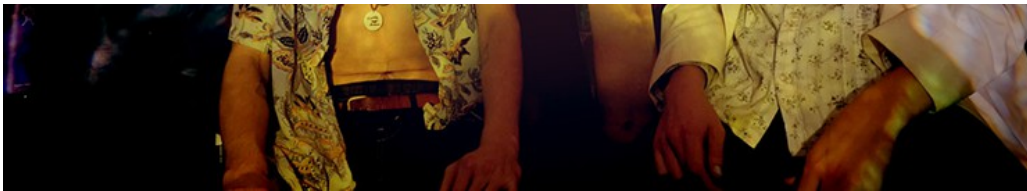
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Formed in Phoenix in 2015, singer Karen Beltran (stage name Molly) and the Molluscs (Miguel Guzman on guitar and synth, Edward Valdez on bass, Diego Garcia on guitar, and Jesus Medina on drums, ranging in age from 16 to 20) initially bonded over the Velvet Underground, but gems like "Kiss N' Tell" and the instrumental "Clancy" are pure pop. Recorded by Aaron Ponzo of the 600 Collective in his garage, what sets the band's EP apart from the crowded field of Burger Records clones is its sense of dynamics. "No Voy a Cambiar" evokes the lushness of classic Britpop, while "When?" sounds cut from the K Records cloth, weirdly sentimental like the best of Beat Happening. On closing track "Bailey," the band layers careening, distorted guitars under Molly's pretty, droning vocals. "There is nothing good for me," she sings, a classic lover's lament punctuated by interwoven pop-punk guitars. The group's been playing house shows and at Trunk Space ("Those are really the only places we play," Beltran says), solidifying its garage pop sound, but Molly and crew are eager to experiment.

The group's SoundCloud page offers a hint at another direction: an instrumental electro take of "Dopamine."

"It's inspired by Bruce Springsteen and Tears for Fears – '80s pop you hear on the radio," Guzman says, noting that he's keen to explore synth pop, citing gated drum-machine sounds and Joy Division as influences. It's woozy and lovely, a strong demonstration of the sharp melodies that give Molly and the Molluscs an edge over their less nuanced garage rock peers. **JASON P. WOODBURY**





Harrison Fjord

Courtesy of Harrison Fjord

### Harrison Fjord

You can breathe a sigh of relief. Harrison Fjord is not a young joke band hiding behind what sounds like the name for a bar trivia team.

When Mario Yniguez and Dallin Gonzales are asked the obvious question of what their favorite Harrison Ford movie is, Gonzales answers quickly with *The Fugitive*.

"*Air Force One* is pretty awesome," exclaims Yniguez.

They barely mention *Star Wars* and the Indiana Jones films, since five of the seven band members are below drinking age.

"It feels good to be doing what we're doing at the age we are," Yniguez says.

"But it can be disheartening to miss cool acts," Gonzales adds.

Yniguez and Gonzales' early passions lie north of downtown Chandler in the choir room at Chandler High School, where many of the members of Harrison Fjord met. Most of them now attend Mesa Community College. When pressed for a word to describe their music, Gonzalez uses the term "genreless," only to have Yniguez quickly correct him on grounds that the word sounds pretentious. Gonzalez's statement isn't out of line when you hear the ambitious eight-minute opus "Approximately 906 Miles." It starts with an organ straight out of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* but ends somewhere avant-garde. Other songs from their 2015 EP, *Puspa in Space*, are exercises in new wave and jazz.

"The project has never been guided heavily by one specific direction," Yniguez says, while Gonzales calls it "collaborative and thorough."

The bandmates attribute their musical agility to their involvement with a cappella (both are members of the ensemble Sounds of the Mouth) and the motivation of their choir teacher, Lori Lyford, director of the Scottsdale Chorus. If there's a case for keeping music in schools, the determined ambitions of Harrison Fjord should be presented as evidence. As they create their full-length debut, Yniguez sees Harrison Fjord evolving into a collective with elements of choir, musical theater, and visual art mixed in. **JASON KEIL**



MRCH

Jim Louvau

## MRCH

Upon its debut, MRCH (pronounced March), well, marched through 2015 with three stunning singles. January's charmingly twee pop "Validation" was followed in June by the rocking, aggressive "Highway Drivin'" and the mesmerizing dream pop of "Spin" in November. Each song showed off a different style, but each possessed MRCH's distinctive indie electronica sentiment.

The group began as a spinoff for Prowling Kind members Mickey Pangburn, Jesse Pangburn, and Erin Beal. But it seems the side project's momentum has surpassed that of the Prowling Kind. Most recently, "Spin" was featured in Ford's Pitchfork-produced "In Focus" series, in an episode in which Alexis Krauss of Sleigh Bells and Bethany Cosentino of Best Coast interviewed each other.

Last year was only the start, and 2016 should see the release of MRCH's first EP now that the band has grown into its sound.

"We spent the first year of our existence allowing ourselves to organically discover our sound, often playing unfinished tunes and tweaking, changing, even completely overhauling songs until we love each one we play," Mickey Pangburn says. "Now, we're finally at a point where we feel good about tracking several tunes and releasing them as a unit. We plan on getting into the studio in March to track an EP of four or five songs."

MRCH toured the West Coast last year, and the band will head out on the road again in February to Seattle and back, then it plans to explore the Midwest and, ultimately, the East Coast to promote its debut record. Keep your ears peeled. **MITCHELL HILLMAN**



The Hill in Mind

Shaunté Glover

## The Hill in Mind

My introduction to the Hill in Mind came in 2014 via Flying Blanket Studios owner Bob Hoag, who put the group's self-titled debut EP in my hand and told me it was his favorite recent project. It clearly must have been because why else would he drive around with copies of it in his car to give out?

The group is led by Joshua Hill, who writes in a classic pop style, mixing an almost vaudevillian music-hall piano over bouncy rock tunes that swing from nerd rock to mid-period Bowie histrionics. Some stingier writers might balk at Hill's tendency to cram two, and sometimes three, potential songs into one four-minute opus. But anyone who loves pop with lots of twist and turns hardly could come away dissatisfied from a song like "Spider Shirt." The tune, with its lyrics' failed messianic tendencies ("You're not dying for me but I'm listening to you"), combines psychedelia with new wave and prog rock before ending on a "Spider Man's playing at the mall tonight" refrain that's sure to bring a smile to the listener.

Last summer, the Hill in Mind released *Thimble, Needle, and Thread*, a quieter, folkier album than the group's previous EP. *Thimble's* heaviest track, "Touria," contains a men's choir section amid electric guitar bombast. The record's beautiful, baroque pop concludes with autobiographical nods to distant relatives and their tales of woe. Subtle, stirring stuff.

By year's end, the Hill in Mind turned in a Christmas EP, and Hill recorded a solo album called "Hill Never Sing Again," filled with ambient sounds recorded outside Flying Blanket Studios in Mesa. But fear not that Hill replaced his bandmates with a few stray birds and the occasional passing airplane. This year, the band is planning a more tours and a few music videos for its previously released music. **SERENE DOMINIC**





Twin Ponies

Jessica Spriggs

### Twin Ponies

You can tell Twin Ponies is barreling down an uncharted trail when you watch its members get bent out of shape trying to describe the band's trajectory. They trot out all the usual suspects – post-rock, post-grunge, post-punk. They even mention dreaded math rock, a term people use to denigrate music that's working harder than they are.

Twin Ponies is all and none of these. Yes (no pun intended), they're progressive, but they're aggressive, too – imagine XTC at its most agitated coexisting with Pavement at its most reflective. And Twin Ponies is funny, in a wry sort of way. I can't think of another local band that could serve up a spine-tingling song about a mental breakdown while name-checking breakfast treats and Aunt Jemima and not sound overreaching.

That's just one track off Twin Ponies' stellar EP from last summer, *Friendly Pet Mass Graves*. If 2013's *Pores* was your point of entry, the band took on a darker edge and elbowed out jazzy chords in 2015 with songs like "Griff," which closes the EP much the way "The Dreamer's Dream" finishes Television's *Adventure* – a regal progression of guitar riffs from Wayne Jones and Jacob Lauxman takes a few aggro detours with dissonant chords before ending in relative calm. On "Rock and Roll Cough," you have the synth bass of Phillip Hanna and the timekeeping of Jordan Tompkins beating beneath it like an irregular heart.

This year seems to be a consolidation of last year's strengths. As it did in 2015 at this time, the band played a January residency at the Time Out Lounge and will release another split single.

"We just finished a seven-inch split with Dent to be released around March or April," Hanna says. "We are also working on new material for a full-length record to be released later this year." **SERENE DOMINIC**



RNA

Steve Soto

### RNA

From the suburban void of Gilbert comes RNA, a fuzz-driven post-rock mammoth complete with well-disciplined technical elements and catchy left-field guitar hooks. The brainchild of drummer/vocalist Zebadiah Scibelli-Gotlieb and guitarist Jeremy Peterson, the duo manages to achieve more power and dynamic acuity than most large-roster heavy ensembles.

Pulling off a two-piece outfit is a difficult task, regardless of genre. That's what makes RNA's ability to produce a Load Records-level of volume and dissonance all the more impressive.

Becoming a two-piece happened naturally for them: "We've been jamming together for years, and it went from a casual project to something more serious," says Scibelli-Gotlieb regarding the choice to remain solely a guitar-and-drum duo.

This said, you'll find comparisons to bands like Melvins and Sonic Youth just as easy to justify as is Lightning Bolt or any other power duo. RNA effortlessly falls into the doing-something-new-without-trying category that so many aspiring musicians fall flat on their face trying to reach. The band alternates heavy-handed pummels and bluesy (and at times psychedelic) riffs driven forward by galloping breakbeats and solid, in-the-pocket rhythms. It's capped with Scibelli-Gotlieb's reverb-drenched vocals, which are far more fine-tuned than they seem at first.

Over the past couple of years, RNA has drifted through the underground, playing DIY house shows and small venues, most notably sharing bills with Seattle's Health Problems and Minnesota's Animal Lover.

The band quietly released its debut demo, *Living, Not Alive*, on Bandcamp last spring and followed up strongly with *Deltas*, released on New Year's Day. *Deltas* solidifies RNA's sound in a big way and is set to see a physical release before February. "We have tapes coming out soon," Scibelli-Gotlieb says. "And we'll hopefully release something on vinyl when we have the means to do so." **ROGER CALAMAI**



Skink

Tom Reardon

### Skink

"We're like a chili, you know?" says Orin Portnoy, singer/guitar wrangler of new metro Phoenix band Skink. Speaking in hushed tones with a smirk on his face, the bespectacled frontman compares himself and his bandmates to meat, beans, and spices simmering on a stove. "You come back, like, six hours later and there we are."

The group has been around only for about seven months, but its members' pedigrees are those of well-established scene veterans. Portnoy has played with a number of notable Phoenix bands, including Odds and Sods, Automatic Erasers, and Hi Fi Lo. Michael Parkin usually is known for playing guitar – as he did in The Sport Model and Blanche Davidian – but in Skink, he's seen and heard destroying the four fat strings on a Fender Precision bass. Rounding out the trio is a timekeeping wizard, drummer Eric Guthrie, who also played in Hi Fi Lo and Fluidrive.

Parkin describes the band's sound as "fast, loud, aggressive, and mean" before getting shot down by his bandmates.

"You're the only one who is mean," Portnoy says.

"We're not particularly fast, either," Guthrie adds.

Regardless of its inability to describe its sound, the band *is* heavy, noisy, stony, and full of piss and vinegar. Think of Skink as part Kyuss (with which Josh Homme of Queens of the Stone Age got his start), part Girls Against Boys ('90s New York indie rock giants), and part classic desert punk. When you mix it all together, you get the chili of the local heavy-rock scene.

In 2016, the band plans to record. In fact, this seems to be the plan for these three scene vets, who bring a load of talent to the table. Like many of their peers in the burgeoning over-40 Phoenix rock scene, they are relatively choosy about when and where they play, with only one gig on the horizon: Saturday, January 30, at Pho Cao in Scottsdale. **TOM REARDON**





The Christian Family

*Michael Little*

### The Christian Family

Sometimes, Daniel Shircliff likes it rough and raw. Garage rock, that is.

The raucous 1960s style of garage punk is one thing that gets him excited. One of his bands, Freaks of Nature, exemplifies the sound and has amassed a following of fans who like it gritty, too.

Other times, he doesn't mind sweetening the pot. He'd had it in his head for a while that he'd like to do a two-piece garage punk band with harmonies.

"I was already a big fan of Cherie Cherie, and when I ran into Ann [Seletos, Cherie's drummer], I immediately saw what was possible," he says.

Turns out, Seletos was a big fan of his, too, so when he told her about the idea and asked her to get together and give it a try, she didn't hesitate. And Christian Family was born – Shircliff on guitar, Seletos on drums, with both handling vocal duties.

Shircliff's overarching idea was to put something together that could sound like a blend of longtime Detroit garage rockers the Gories, Memphis garage punk trio Oblivians, and the sounds of '60s girl groups, with a little bit of the Saints' aggressive guitar sound in the mix.

The duo has crafted a style out of the sounds they love, maintaining a stripped-down nature and stark effect. "Mad-A-Lyn" is a catchy, stompy track that gets edgier as Seletos screams, while "I Got Problems" features Ramones-esque hooks and sensibilities. The duo's voices blend together well, hinting at innocence but also soulful sass.

When asked if the band's name has a specific meaning or message, Shircliff says, "We are the Christian Family. We have a perfect message of love. We love love and we hate hate. It's like a gospel group. We just want people to come together, hear our message of love, dance, and have fun." **AMY YOUNG**

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