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BIO-JAMMING

Local band Nodding Onion combines science, plants and music

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The allium plant in front of the drums make Nodding Onion a quartet. This plant's not an accessory. It's the lead. The band's human musicians follow the frequencies of plants, playing improv ambient post-rock.

So far, Nodding Onion's also jammed with witch hazel, bee-balm and goldenrod.

This is a new venture for Tim Seifarth, who's a drummer, usually in metal and hardcore bands. Nodding Onion combines his passion for music with his interest in plants. As owner of Earthbound Artisan in Ephrata, he designs and builds ecological landscapes with a focus on native plants. With the help of a PlantWave device, the plants' voices can be heard through the universal language of music.

PlantWave works by making music from plants' biorhythms, or slight electric variations detected by two electrodes

With the help of a PlantWave device, Nodding Onion adds the voices of plants at places like Horn Farm Center's plant sale, right.

placed on plant leaves. A user can choose which instrument they'd like the plant to "play."

Nodding Onion is a side project of the band Orphan, comprised of Seifarth on drums, Mike Keese on guitar and Jay Smith on bass. (Orphan's vocalist James David is not in Nodding Onion.) Seifarth talked about making music with plants in this conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.

Is the root of Nodding Onion PlantWave?

I've been exploring making music by myself. In that process, I got these hang drums and the tongue drums and that started to open up things. Then



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the PlantWave was there. What a cool sound layer. Communing in music is a sacred space in itself and I commune with plants in the earth on a daily basis. I touch them. I feel them and I smell them. I can commune in music? With the natural world and give it a voice? I'm in.

Who would say no to that?

I remember when it came in the mail. We hooked it up and walked around here (at his home near Schoeneck). It was so powerful to hear it and to hear the interactions of things. It gives a voice to this unspoken place.

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HEAR THE BAND LIVE

Nodding Onion's next performance is at Mennonite Central Committee's BioBlitz and Nature Fest, 9 a.m. to noon, Saturday, July 8 at the MCC Welcoming Place, 21 S. 12th St., Akron. Volunteers are asked to count insects and plants. The event is free but registration (at lanc.news/bioblitz) is required.

Learn more about Nodding Onion on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.



VIDEO ONLINE

Watch Nodding Onion perform at lanc.news/noddingonion.

Nodding Onion: Ambient rock group plays along with the plants

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You can record a plant. I put that base recording in software and was adding things to it solo. These guys (in Orphan) are my music soulmates. We have these warm-up improv jams. What if we play to this (a plant)? We did it once and just the concept of it as a band ... Nobody else is doing that.

How do you describe PlantWave?

It's a device that records the electronic pulses of any living thing. It takes that electronic signal it passes it through an algorithm in this app and it creates a soundscape. Within the app you can manipulate the soundscape. You can change the key, the frequency, its pulse, repetition and all of these things.

This gives plants voices. What are they saying?

It makes music and that that engages an emotional response. For something that wouldn't typically be able to do that, it's a profound experience.

Here's a voice for this thing and it changes. It shows effects to different stimuli.

Tell me about that.

If you're hooked up to it, it might be setting a pulse. If you touch the plant, it's picking up your energy. It's maybe creating its own energy. If bees land on it, that sets it off. It creates different impulses. Think of it as it's getting this electronic pulse, but within that electronic pulse, it's divided into four sounds. Whatever the frequency or signal of that electricity, it stimulates these certain things. If you change that and interact with it with insects or touch or wind or whatever then it will engage in the other options. The music moves with the interactions.

Was it around this time of year when you first used it?

I think it was in February or March because this tree was just budding out. We put it on the buds and it was interacting. We broke a branch and it stopped.

What was the sound like before it stopped?

The sound output, you can manipulate it. The plant gives a sig-



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Nodding Onion, a band that performs with plants via a PlantWave device, played at Horn Farm Center's plant sale in Hellam Township, York County, in May. "We're not built to sit on a stage," says drummer Tim Seifarth says. "We're meant to be put in a corner of a room."



nal into the device. It all sounds lovely.

Unless you want to make it more metal.

I tried to make one really drone-y. You can make a cricket chirp, really bass-heavy drone, really low-end to see what it would sound like (with a houseplant). It sounded

dark and it even damaged one of my speakers.

There's new research about plants emitting high-frequency sounds whenever they're under stress, like drought or cutting. Have you noticed that?

I have noticed things. If you

do it shortly after watering, the signals are really low and calm. When we played at E-Town Earth Day, we hooked up to this witch hazel plant. The wind was whipping this plant around. One of the guys was like, 'Man he's really active.' And I was like, with the wind, it's under constant stress and stimulation. There was a no-

iceable difference.

Do different plants have different voices?

There's different rhythms and accents within the same sound between different plants.

What are some of the main plants you've been working with?

We are trying to play exclusively with the nodding onion but we did witch hazel and other indoor plants, peace lily and bird of paradise.

Is there a plant whose sound you don't prefer?

There is a houseplant. I don't know what it's called. It seems to be less active. I'm curious because it's a little more succulent. Its energy is reserved. It seems like the more lush or fragile plants create more of a signal because things are happening.

It makes you wonder.

It opens up all of these things. What are the differences we're hearing?

Does the plant lead? Who's in charge?

We listen to the plant. That creates a feel. It depends on who chimes in first. Typically, it lands on the bassist or myself to establish a groove within it. Then the guitar player, he plays atmospheric things. He's embellishing and adding to that sound layer with hooks.

Before, we let the plant play. To add more dynamics, the bass player now will turn it off and on and tweak some of the effects through his pedals. It's another added layer of manipulation.

You have to be connected to do this.

It's a real beautiful experience. There's a thing there (the plant) that you have no control over.

What is that like?

It's very within that spiritual sense. People talk about being in the moment. That can be a hard thing to do a lot of the time, to be very present in the exact moment. When you're doing that (the music, its creation and the interaction), it's the most present I ever am.

It's a sacred sonic connection.