Though more mainstream, TMBG is still distinctive

John Henry
They Might Be Giants
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star reporter

With its latest album, They Might Be Giants ushers in the biggest change in the band's sound since its debut. Back in 1985, John Flansburgh and John Linnell borrowed the name of a bad flick from the early '70s and started producing music. John F. played guitar, John L. played keyboards, both provided vocals, and they were backed up by some studio tracks and a drum machine. Seven years and five LPs later, Flansburgh and Linnell finally scrapped a full band together, complete with bass, drums, and two horns, and went touring. Studio time with the same musicians has resulted in John Henry, released in mid-September.

Although this change makes live performances much easier on the band (as John and John now have a band to kick them up as opposed to unrehearsed pre-recorded tracks), it changes the sound of the band quite radically. With the addition of bass and drum tracks on every song, some of the edge of the original They Might Be Giants is gone. They sound quite a bit more mainstream.

Still, the music is very identifiable as the group They Might Be Giants that we all know and love. The first single off of John Henry, "Snail Shell," has heavy drums and bass throughout, but the musical idioms of the Johns are recognizable. The new instrumentation has not kept the band from being wacky. John Henty, Flansburgh and John Linnell borrowed the large four-chambered heart. ("So the warm blood flows / With the large four-chambered heart." Maybe "Meet James Ensor" will do for art historians what "Mammal" did for biologists everywhere.

The cover art for the album depicts a bunch of elementary school children playing with a pickas and a skull with the word "They" drilled into its forehead. The single containing "Snail Shell" and several bonus tracks (including one titled "She Was A Hotel Detective") which bears no similarity to the "She Was A Hotel Detective" from their debut album is entitled Back To Skull. Still this doesn't explain the title of the LP, which is presumably named for the legendary black American whose strength was celebrated in ballads and tall tales earlier this century. Why, you may ask? Why do they do anything? All we know is they just might be giants.

They Might Be Giants will be performing with their full band on Oct. 21 at the Orpheum Theatre.