



## A DIFFERENT tune

By David R. Adler  
FOR THE INQUIRER

**A**fter a quarter of a century, the critic has become an artist, making music with performers he once reviewed.

Awkward? Not for Tom Moon and his band, the Moon Hotel Lounge Project.

Moon, a former music critic for The Inquirer, released the group's debut album, *Into the Ojald*, on Jan. 11 on his own Frosty Cordial imprint. The band makes its live debut next Sunday at L'Etage on South Sixth Street.

Music

### Moon Hotel Lounge Project

Doors open at 7 p.m., sets at 8 and 10 p.m. on Jan. 30, L'Etage, 624 S. Sixth St. Tickets: \$5. Information: <http://creperie-beaumonde.com> or 215-692-0656.

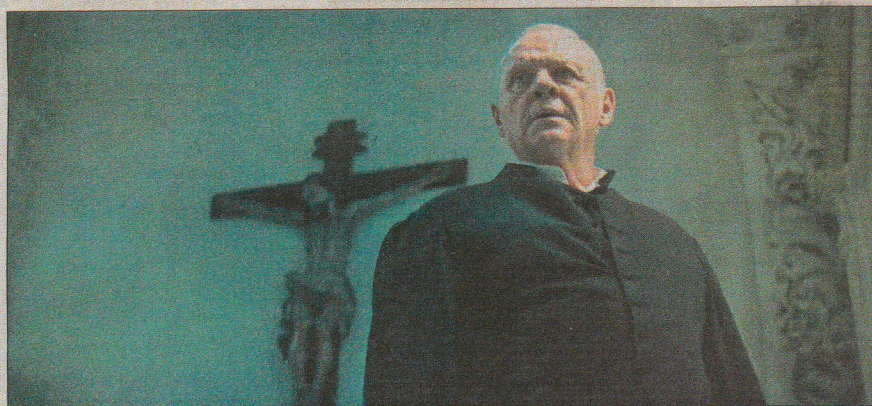
Trained as a saxophonist at the University of Miami, Moon can boast of tour credits with the likes of big-band leader Maynard Ferguson. But when he joined the In-

See **MOON HOTEL** on H6

Tom Moon says he "wanted to make ... music that's sexy, that has some humanity to it, that is not trying to stun anybody."

After years as a pop-music critic, Tom Moon has picked up his saxophone and released a CD. His Moon Hotel Lounge Project will make its live debut in Philly.

LAURENCE KESTERSON / Staff Photographer



Warner Bros. Pictures

### INSIDE



**Edward J. Sozanski:** An interactive exhibition at Michener. **H5.**

### Book Review

## Isolated, and memory is no comfort

Reviewed by Steven Rea

**T**he people in Colm Tóibín's potent new story collection — a film set designer, an academic, a young, gay Dubliner in Barcelona, a widow who finds her





# Former critic moves to a new gig —

**MOON HOTEL** from H1

quirer staff in the late 1980s, Moon ran into the conflict-of-interest quandary: If he wrote, he couldn't perform. He chose writing.

Moon's *Inquirer* stint lasted nearly 20 years, ending in 2005. Now, he's emerging from the woodshed with a folio of new music.

In the "new media" world, blogs and social networking have blurred the lines between critics and artists. But a well-known critic taking the bold step of releasing an album? That's still not common.

Moon's music has a sleek, fusiony character, with sparse, singable melodies, wistful harmonies, and echoes of Brazil and the Caribbean. The band radiates a cool, session-player finesse on Moon originals such as "Seed the Future," "Thank the Eyes," and "Scaffolding, How to Dismantle."

Guitarist Kevin Hanson, from the pop-rock band the Fractals and formerly of Huffamoose, played on and produced the album, giving it a tight and engaging sound.

"It's not a Latin record, it's not a jazz record — that's what was intriguing about this project," says Jim Stager, Moon's bassist, who lives in South Philly. "There was a familiar quality [to the songs], but they'd take these turns. ... They're very mature and well-constructed."

Seated in his publicist's loft in Manhattan's Meatpacking District, Moon talks about his return to performing. "Doing this gave me new appreciation for the futility of precise categorization where music is concerned," he says. Still, he's able to pinpoint certain affinities. He mentions Wayne Shorter and the Police in the same breath.

Pressed for a music critic's breakdown of the sound, he describes it as "Jobim and the rhythm sections that played behind the great female singers of Brazil, meets early Pat Metheny Group plus *Largo*-era Brad Mehldau, plus Walt Wanderley, with just a hint of Lounge Lizards rowdiness or something."

*Into the Ojalá* is a self-release; Moon jokes that the "world headquarters" of his label is the third floor of his house in Haddonfield. Today the DIY route is common, but it's very unlike the world Moon covered as a critic, where bands fought tooth and nail for big record deals. "I [saw firsthand] how much of an industry there is now that's set up to help indie artists get their stuff out there, which didn't used to exist at all," he says.

The DIY route doesn't come cheap, to be sure, but artists are free to adjust expectations and budgets as necessary, and retain full creative control.

For the music itself, Moon's guiding premise was counterintuitive. "The fact is that in our culture, music is ignorable," he says. "A lot of music just washes over people. In my most subversive thinking, I was like, 'All right, let's start with that. Let's assume that it's going to be ignorable.'"

Thus the "hotel" idea. Soon after leaving *The Inquirer*, Moon began work on *1,000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die*, a marvelously eclectic guide published in fall 2008 by Workman (the A section covers Abba to Albert Ayler). It was during his book tour that Moon developed a fascination with the psychological impact of hotel lounges.



The cover of "Into the Ojalá," the debut recording of the Moon Hotel Lounge Project. It was released on Tom Moon's own Frosty Cordial label.

"The Ian Schrager stuff is no joke," he says. "The Soho Grand, you walk into that little lounge and you are not in the same state you were in on the street. Your mood is slightly altered just by the space."

With *Into the Ojalá* (an Arabic-derived Spanish idiom meaning "I hope"), Moon was after a musical equivalent of those lounges. "I wanted to make instrumental music that's sexy, that has some humanity to it, that is not trying to stun anybody," he offers. "It's going to ooze around you."

Moon wanted to avoid what he calls "athletic jazz," in part because he didn't feel he had the chops. "There's nothing tricky about this music," he says. "If I can play it, it's not tricky."

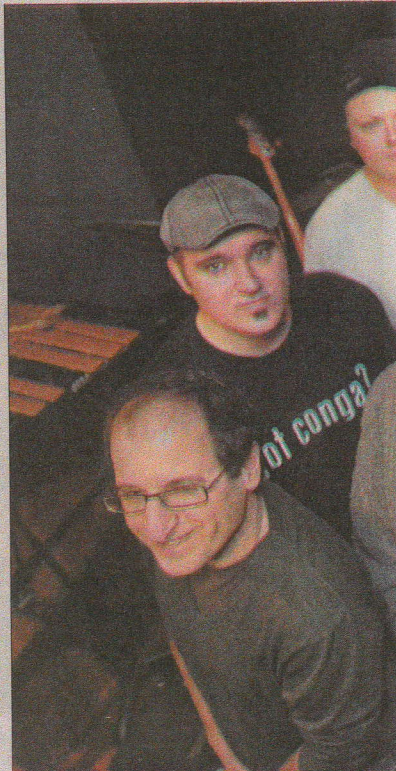
His saxophone role models are players he calls "tone merchants" — "the guys who played on the Jobim records, the Sergio Mendes records." They are musicians who get a rich sound and serve the music without fuss. "There's a tenor solo on the album *Elis Regina in London* [1969], it's a British cat I think, and he's no great shakes. But he's perfect. I started to make a study of players like that."

In addition to *The Inquirer*, Moon has done work for Rolling Stone, GQ, Spin, National Public Radio, and other outlets. He's received two ASCAP Deems Taylor awards for criticism. But like a lot of writers, he's been affected by the bad economy and dramatic changes in media culture.

Upon finishing his book, he had a hard time breaking back into the freelance market. He didn't give up, but more and more the saxophone started to look appealing. So he dusted off some original compositions and sought out various musicians to workshop them.

Enter Kevin Hanson. A versatile guitarist with a home studio in Germantown, Hanson was impressed when he heard Moon's first demo tracks.

"A lot of times the chords would seemingly crash into one another," Hanson said via phone, referring to Moon's unpredictable progressions. "But



At M Sound Studio in Philadelphia, Tom Moon, center, Jim Stager, and Erik Johnson. Moon, trained as a saxophonist,

they held together with the melody. Right away, I thought, 'This writer knows what he's doing. He really has a handle on how he wants this to sound.'"

"Tom wanted a free-flowing creative process from the band," says drummer Erik Johnson, "which was refreshing, because a lot of the session work I do is much more fixed in nature."

It was the first time these musicians ever heard Moon play, though they had a history with him going back more than 10 years.

Hanson, Stager, and Johnson all had been members of the alt-rock band Huffamoose. Moon championed the group when it signed with Interscope Records and released *We've Been Had Again*, scoring a minor hit with the song "Wait" in 1997. "Tom wrote a story on us," Hanson recalled, "and we got to hang out with him for a couple of days. We really hit it off with this guy."

Success was elusive, however. The label dropped Huffamoose, though the group did go on to record

# THE WORLD'S

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# making his own music



LAURENCE KESTERSON / Staff Photographer

joined by the members of his group: From left, Mike Frank, Josh Robinson, Kevin Hanson, Behn Gillece, vibraphonist at the University of Miami, has toured with musicians such as big-band leader Maynard Ferguson.

*I Wanna Be Your Pants* for Shanachie in 2000. This time Moon didn't like the album, and he said so in print.

"Yeah, Tom wrote a pretty bad review," Hanson continued, "and our lead singer [Craig Elkins] sent him an angry e-mail, so those guys had a bit of a tiff. But I saw Tom a couple of times over the years and it was cool. I would always hear Tom doing reviews on NPR or I'd read his articles, and I've got to say, I pretty much agreed with most of what this guy said. So it didn't really bum me out too bad."

Stager concurs: "Whether or not I agreed with Tom's opinions, I respected them because they were well thought out. That's all I cared about."

Hanson and his fellow Huffmoosers have long played jazz and other music together, so the Moon project was a good fit. Today, they work with keyboardist Mike Frank in the Fractals, so Frank came on board the Moon project as well. Jazz vibraphonist Behn Gillece adds luster and

fullness to the harmonic palette. Percussionist Josh Robinson brings rhythmic snap to the Latin numbers.

"I was in no way ready to have a musical conversation with Kevin and Mike when we started," Moon says. "They were more than patient. They did not have to spend any time with me. But they taught me a lot and made it feel easy. That was a huge gift."

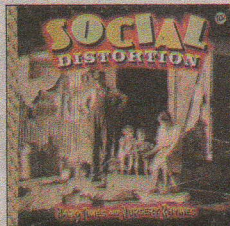
Could Moon be selling himself short? "In rehearsal," Hanson says, "every now and then from Tom there'd be this blistering, angular Coltrane lick, and we'd all stop and say, 'Where the hell did that come from?' He's got all this information, but he's very sparing with it."

It's possible he'll unleash more of that when the band plays live. "I predict it'll take on a life of its own," Hanson says. "If it needs to go into outer space, it's definitely going to go there, and I think everybody's on board to let that happen, especially Tom."

## Pop

### Social Distortion

*Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes*  
(Epitaph ★★★½)



Times may have changed, but not Social Distortion (in sound if not in personnel). "I'll be here to the bitter end/ And I'm here to make my stand/ With my guitar in my hand," gravel-voiced front man and Social D. constant Mike Ness declares on "Still Alive," as the band concludes the album with one final blazing rocker.

That steadfastness has served the veteran Southern California band well. *Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes* shows there's still plenty of juice in Social Distortion's guitar-driven attack. And also in Ness' persona as a bruised and battered survivor. Maybe that's because he knows how to balance the punkish edge of the music with a clear-eyed adult perspective that goes beyond the hard-boiled veneer to reveal some tenderness and even vulnerability — both in his own songs and in the way he connects to the past. The only non-original is Hank Williams' "Alone and Forsaken" — rocked up, of course, but still as desolate as the title indicates. Meanwhile, "Bakersfield" includes a pleading recitation addressed to the singer's faraway woman that could have come straight out of a vintage soul song.

— Nick Cristiano

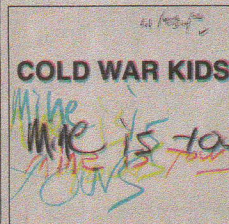
### Cold War Kids

*Mine Is Yours*  
(Downtown ★★½)

It's undeniable: The word *sellout* is a cliché. But like all truly pervasive clichés, it

## New Recordings

Ratings: ★★★★★ Excellent, ★★★ Good, ★★ Fair, ★ 1



has its uses.

So yes, you could argue, as many already have, that *Mine Is Yours* is when Cold War Kids sell out. When the prickly, quirky nerds of yore trade their riffs for spacious anthems. Call it the Kings of Leon effect.

Now, that's not the whole story — but it's most of it. Truth be told, *Mine Is Yours* is a perfectly adequate indie pastiche that never quite connects.

From the charged "Royal Blue" to the echoing title track, it's clear that the band behind the brilliant *Robbers & Cowards* is trying for something more accessible. But in that attempt, they come up with little more than a slick, overproduced effort that will please many and amaze none.

— Emily Tartanella

### Amanda Palmer

*Amanda Palmer Goes Down Under*  
(Liberator ★★★½)



Since her hiatus from cabaret-punk's Dresden Dolls, happily histrionic chanteuse/pianist Amanda Palmer has worked hard at independence. Fans celebrate her fight (and

victory) to get released on Roadrunner after the label sought to pull scenes from a Palmer video because her words) they thought looked fat. Since then, theatrical melodist and pointedly literate lyricist seemed freer still, recording oddities such as an EP of Radiohead hits on ukulele as well as this new tributary antipodean.

It might seem self-indulgent, an album of Aussie covers (a rendition of Nick Cave's "The Ship" is more dramatic than author's) and Palmer's written about (or while in Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania). But self-indulgence is the point. As an unchecked id, Palmer is a marvel. Her strong, achy-breaky trill makes tour-guide songs luscious, her paean to Vegemite yeast-extract spread so unaccountably beloved by Australians) bracing. The electro-glam "Map of Tasmania" is full of silly sexy double entendres, "In My Mind" (featuring partner Brian Vigliani) sounds like a promise of the next Dresden Dolls effort will be slyer and emotive than anything the duo's past.

— A.D. Ar

### Monotonic

*Not Yet*  
(Drag City ★★½)



The reverbed guitar chords that open Monotonic's second full-length album are aggressive, dirty, and loud. Just like their last album and just like their live

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