

# Darkness on the edge of Marin

## American Drag is poised for the spotlight

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It must be something in the imported mineral water. For more than four decades, Marin County has spawned some of rock music's most influential acts, including Santana, the Grateful Dead and Journey. Sammy Hagar makes his home north of the Gate, along with members of the Doobie Brothers, Jefferson Airplane and Metallica. It's an elite group, rife with brilliant songwriters, Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famers and cultural icons. And today, Marin's great musical tradition continues with a dynamic local band called American Drag.

The guys in American Drag are not crossdressers, although the name of their band might suggest otherwise. And if their rocking, heartfelt and socially conscious eponymous debut album is any indication of what's to come from this scrappy North Bay five-piece, then I suggest you catch their live show now, because they're about to rocket through the stratosphere. This time next year, they'll be playing arenas with Nickelback and taping episodes of "MTV Cribs" and you'll be lucky to get an overpriced ticket from an eight-fingered scalper with unchecked scoliosis and a lazy eye. Yeah, these guys are that good.



photo courtesy of Chris Webb

From left, bass player Joe Shaughnessy, lead singer Will Evankovich and lead guitarist Jason Thwaites practice along with rhythm guitarist Monroe Grisman, not pictured.

American Drag was formed from the ashes of a moderately successful Seattle band called Grace (which was fronted by Chris Cornell's brother). "I think we got caught up in the idea of creating a musical product for people to purchase, and we sort of lost the wonder part of it,"

said bass player Joe Shaughnessy, adding, "I've been to the sausage factory and I've seen how they make sausage. And it ain't pretty." (For the record, this is the first time I've seen processed pork used as a metaphor for disillusionment.)

After Grace imploded, lead singer and songwriter Will Evankovich, whose cooler-than-cool vocal rasp falls somewhere between Live's Ed Kowalczyk and Stereophonics' Kelly Jones (who has the best voice in rock), returned to the Bay Area and began writing all new material, which would become American Drag.

"During this period, which I refer to as the reconstruction, I was working full time as a high-profile wine buyer. I was making a lot of money, but I was miserable. Sales is such a dirty business," Evankovich said. In a rocking track from the new record appropriately called "Salesman," he sings,

*Check your smile at St.  
Peter's gate / Sell him dirt from  
an empty grave / Damn all the  
dollars that make you the man /  
It doesn't mean shit at the end of  
the plan.*

"As I started looking at my lyrics in their entirety, I realized I'd written a bunch of songs about being in jail, even though I've never been arrested," Evankovich said. "Every one of these songs is about being trapped and looking for a way out."

On "Get Your Money's Worth," Evankovich pleads: *How do you expect to make it working for the machine / It breaks your back and drinks your name at the grip of someone else's dream.*

While American Drag's lyrics may not have the blue-collar sensibility of early Bruce Springsteen — after all, Marin does not provide the same gritty, working-class backdrop as urban New Jersey — the message of finding hope amid a sea of isolation and despair remains the same. Springsteen built his career on these themes in songs like "Thunder Road," "Backstreets," "Darkness on the Edge of Town" and the granddaddy of them all, "Born to Run," which opens with the rousing battle cry: *In the day we sweat it out in the streets of a runaway American dream.* And this is essentially what American Drag is all about: the runaway American dream.

The new, independently produced American Drag record is driving, melodic rock 'n' roll from top to bottom, with hints of Throwing Copper-era Live, Train (minus any reference to soy lattes or Tae Bo) and the driving guitars of Soundgarden, circa Superunknown.

"If people love the new record, great. If nobody buys it, I'll die knowing we made the record we wanted to make. And we've ruined everything in our personal lives to get here," said Shaughnessy.

Standout tracks include "Throwing Fables," "Drive," "Holding On," "Awake" and the gorgeous "Spinning." The record is in stores April 15 (check Red Devil or Bedrock), and you can see the band perform April 23 at 19 Broadway in Fairfax.

I won't say much more about American Drag because you need to buy the record and hear it for yourself. But to borrow a phrase from the late, incomparable Lester Bangs, it doesn't mean that a juxtaposition of poets might not be in order:

*Good morning your  
city is weeping  
You've lost all your  
angels in the sky  
Still humble still  
hungry still breathing  
And by the grace of  
our souls we try  
Your priests in your  
head are so worried  
Your white collar  
still trying to fly  
But you're stressed out, your  
payments, the bleeding  
Grazing your heart  
and your mind*

— American Drag

*Some folks are  
born into a good life  
Other folks get it  
anyway anyhow  
I lost my money and I  
lost my wife  
Them things don't  
seem to matter much  
to me now  
Lives on the line  
where dreams are  
found and lost  
I'll be there on time  
and I'll pay the cost  
For wanting things  
that can only be found  
In the darkness on the  
edge of town*

— Bruce Springsteen

To learn more about  
the band, visit the  
Web site at  
[americandrag.net](http://americandrag.net).