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# One Very, Very Indie Band

by Darcy Frey



Matthias Clamer

**Banded** Clockwise, from top left: Will Butler, Win Buler, Richard Reed Parry, Régine Chassagne, Sarah Neufeld, Tim Kingsbury, Jeremy Gara.

Damn, this church is getting hectic, what with Régine in the organist's alcove coaxing the backup singers to let loose — Sing like really hungry wolves! Like you're sending a desperate alarm to the other wolves! — and Win down in the sanctuary trying to keep the upright double bass and tenor sax from veering toward smooth jazz, and Jeremy picking through dozens of black-metal shipping crates to make sure the equipment's all there — Win's dobro, Régine's hurdy-gurdy, the glockenspiel, the accordions, the giant Asian cymbals and the neon Jesus sign — everything packed up tight and ready to be shipped off to London for the start of the band's yearlong world tour. It's a snowy January night just outside Montreal, and each time the front door opens, gusts of frigid air blow through the nave: Hey, close the. . . Oh, it's Liza! Hey everybody, Liza's here! Earlier, the church got so crowded that Sarah had to record her violin part (Régine: Make it weird, like a ghost violin, a sci-fi violin, a violin from outer space!) squished into the sound booth while Richie took his guitar into the stairwell because someone was playing a Mexican reveille on the trumpet and there was a French horn warming up in the kitchen.

When the members of the Arcade Fire, a Montreal art-rock band led by Win Butler and his wife, Régine Chassagne, were trying to find studio space to record their second full-length album, they took an inventory of their instruments — the hurdy-gurdy and the accordions, but also the baby-grand and upright pianos, the organ and the harpsichord, the xylophone and the Caribbean steel drums. Then they considered the acoustics that

would best suit their music — a kind of surging, post-punk rock with dense orchestrations cut through with painful and, at times, quite beautiful noise collages. Finally, they discussed their ambition to record their rousing, emotionally charged songs with the entire band playing live, though the band has seven permanent members and swells, when strings and horns are added, into an antic carnival orchestra. With the men in suspenders and vests and the women in dresses and lace fingerless gloves, and everyone employing yelps, hand claps, megaphones (for vocal distortion), motorcycle helmets (so they can drum on each other's heads) and the occasional snare drum tossed high into the air, an Arcade Fire show has the feel of a Clash concert infiltrated by Cirque du Soleil.

Given its outsize musical ambitions and unabashed theatricality, the Arcade Fire could have filled a three-ring recording studio. The place it ultimately found to record "Neon Bible," the band's follow-up to its successful and surprisingly poised 2004 debut album, "Funeral," was a 19th-century redbrick church in a small farm town an hour outside of Montreal. The church already had a stage in front, a hundred-foot ceiling that returned rich, live-sounding reverberations and a rear balcony that could be turned into a glassed-in sound booth. Once they bought the place, moved in their equipment and hired two engineers, all they had to do was convert the basement into bedrooms and hire Liza (Win's brother's fiancée's younger sister) as their cook so they could live out there for most of last year, working roughly three weeks on, one off, sometimes playing through the wee hours to get their meticulously arranged and recorded songs just right. ("Neon Bible" will be released March 6.)

The church-turned-recording-studio, the year of living undergraduately — those were merely the latest unexpected events that have transpired since the Arcade Fire started playing hole-in-the-wall clubs in Toronto and Montreal four years ago, then put out "Funeral," an album that, largely because of word-of-blog and a gushing review on [pitchforkmedia.com](http://pitchforkmedia.com), the influential music Web site (an album "at last capable of completely and successfully restoring the tainted phrase 'emotional' to its true origin"), would go on to sell 750,000 copies, which is a lot for an album that was recorded for \$10,000. Once "Funeral" was released, the small gigs started selling out, only to be replaced by larger gigs that sold out too, and before long the Arcade Fire was touring North America and Europe and playing to rapt audiences in Japan and Brazil. Most of the band members are in their mid- to late 20s, but the keyboardist and bass player, Will Butler, who is Win's younger brother, had to ask his professors at Northwestern for permission to miss class so he could appear with the band on [Conan O'Brien](#). Fortunately, he'd graduated by the time David Byrne wrote them a fan letter and joined them onstage for a cover of his song "This Must Be The Place," and [David Bowie](#) (who'd been giving "Funeral" to his friends) asked them to cover "Queen Bitch" at one of their shows and made a surprise appearance in a white suit and straw hat. After the band opened three arena-size shows for [U2](#) in Montreal and Ottawa, [Bono](#) and his mates pronounced the Arcade Fire their favorite new act.

"It was crazy, hilarious, totally surreal," Will says.

"Weird times!" Régine sings.

"Somewhere along the line we became the band that was supposed to save rock 'n' roll," says Richie Parry, who also plays upright double bass.

Wild, sudden success for a band is often the moment Puccini takes over the script (often, too, the moment a band is inspired to make a second album, about the burdens of wild, sudden success), but the Arcade Fire has managed to avoid any gestures toward the operatic. “I can definitely say that playing with David Byrne was one of the most weird, wonderful and lucky things we’ve experienced as musicians,” Richie says. “Onstage that night, we were all making eye contact with each other — you know, something so impossible and far away that we were all of a sudden holding in our hands.” The musicians seem to have strengthened their collective immunity to hype by resolutely doing what they want: they turned down the chance to tour with R.E.M. so they could continue performing their full-length shows; they refused to play Britain’s “Top of the Pops,” on which bands traditionally lip-sync their material, until they were permitted to play live; and they resisted the entreaties of several major record companies, made over a series of lavish dinners, to leave Merge, the independent label that released “Funeral.”

“For ‘Neon Bible,’ we met with a lot of dudes, but honestly it wasn’t that interesting,” Win says. “Merge is like the labels used to be, based on someone’s tastes and interest in music —”

“—instead of statistics and marketing,” Régine says.

“If you look at the Web sites of a lot of the majors,” Win goes on, “they’re selling everything — hip-hop, country, Disney soundtracks. It’s the throw-a-lot-of-garbage-at-the-wall —”

“— and-see-what-sticks strategy,” Régine says “But at least we got to stay in some nice hotels, didn’t we? And we ate good food for a month! And we didn’t lie to anyone either: Right from the start, we made it clear we’d never sign with them. I mean, why would we?”

Even now that the Arcade Fire has been consecrated as Canada’s most celebrated musical export of the moment (Time Canada put the band on its cover), its members still seem to navigate by a compass calibrated toward whatever will bring them the most subversive fun. When it came time to release material from “Neon Bible,” instead of following some professional marketing strategy, they used laptops and iMovie to create a video for YouTube in the style of a late-night, self-help infomercial — “call now!” — then set up a toll-free number where callers could press one button to hear music and another to leave messages, some of which were posted on the band’s Web site. “It was sort of a joke about viral marketing, and viral marketing at the same time,” Win says. “Did it work as real marketing? I have no idea.” To try out new material in performance before heading to London, the band played two benefit gigs — one at Richie’s old high school in Ottawa (in a reversal of adult-world protocol, you had to be in high school and show a valid under-age ID to get in), the other in a church basement in the Polish neighborhood in Montreal where most of the band members live.

“Hey, did someone remember to invite the guys from the pirogi shop?”

“Yeah, I told them we were playing across the street, and they said, ‘That’s our church!’ I put them all on the guest list.”

“Did they come? Did they like the show? God, at one point I was climbing all over the piano. I wonder if they got mad.”

“No, no, they loved it!”

Despite the satisfaction it takes in upending rock-business convention, however, the Arcade Fire has shrewdly kept control of its affairs — paying for both albums itself, buying its own studio to record the second album and retaining the rights to all the master recordings; the band distributes its music by setting up licensing deals (with Merge in North America, with Universal in Europe). “The idea of someone else owning what we do is insane when we did all the work,” Win says. And for all their iconoclastic spirit, the musicians are not unmindful of the considerable power they have accumulated. One day in January, the band’s personal assistant’s car was towed from the lot of a Tim Hortons doughnut shop, even though she was inside buying a dozen glazed at the time. Upon hearing news of this affront, the guitarist Tim Kingsbury suggested they post the matter on [arcadefire.com](http://arcadefire.com) and get free doughnuts for life. “You know,” said Jeremy Gara, the drummer, “I’d like to use that technique to bring down Bell Canada.”

Now, as the huge church windows frame rural darkness and some swirling tornadoes of snow, Liza announces, “Dinner’s ready!” and a general clatter (“Awesome! . . . We love you, Liza!”) erupts as the band members head toward the kitchen with its ceiling streamers and its long, candle-lit table already stocked with baskets of bread and bottles of merlot. Win wants to know how long it will take to get a new passport, because after the six-month “Funeral” tour there are no pages left in his old one. Will is musing on the ethics of putting video games on the band’s expense account, and Sarah Neufeld, the violinist, points out that some groups on tour rack up a grand per night just on booze. Marika Anthony-Shaw (violinist for the live shows) asks if Sarah’s planning to take her violin on the plane as carry-on, because there’s no way Marika’s going to check her viola, not after what happened at that notorious show: Win, whose full-throttle playing can explode into confrontation, heard the band’s previous drummer mess up his part and screamed — perfectly in time to the music — No! No! No! No! which caused the drummer to erupt in fury and hurl his drums across the stage, catching Marika with the high-hat and snapping the bridge of her viola in two. (“Dude!” said a surprised Win. “It was part of the moment!”)

Win Butler, Régine Chassagne, Will Butler, Richard Reed Parry, Tim Kingsbury, Jeremy Gara, Sarah Neufeld — all of them crowding together, massaging one another’s shoulders like actors in the school play and grabbing for empty plates so that Liza can dole out steaming ladles of pasta from her ginormous pot — this is the Arcade Fire, born in Montreal, soon to play London, New York and 5,000-seat venues in Dublin, Paris, Amsterdam, Oslo, Stockholm and Berlin, perhaps the biggest sensation right now on the world indie-music scene.

A week later, in the East London recording studio where the Arcade Fire was unpacking and about to rehearse for its sold-out five-night stand at (appropriately) a church-turned-concert-hall just off the Thames, space was getting tight. All those black-metal crates from the Montreal church were laid out on a cramped soundstage, and wouldn’t you know, Régine couldn’t find the cord for her hurdy-gurdy. While she anxiously rummaged through the boxes, Win tried to talk her down; surely the technical crew could find a

replacement. But the cord was really the least of the musicians' concerns: although they had been rehearsing since completing "Neon Bible" in the fall, they hadn't toured in more than a year; aside from playing to a bunch of high-schoolers and the guys from the pirogi shop (and playing a little chaotically too), they had performed almost none of the new material live; the band was now 10 separate musicians in search of an arresting group persona for their 11 new songs, which differed musically and lyrically from anything they had done before.

"Some people get so rabid at our shows," Richie said. "They get these cathartic experiences. And they'll say it too: 'We saw you that time at so-and-so; it was the best thing we ever saw!' which does give me a twinge of pride. That's what I always wanted at a rock show — to sweat and cry and scream a lot. But with this new material, we may have to back off a bit. We don't want to be shticky, and an improvisatory spirit will help us get around that. The trick is keeping open. You know: What fun thing can we do tonight?"

"Maybe we'll need to be less confrontational," Tim said. "Or maybe we'll need to be more confrontational. Or maybe just less obviously confrontational."

"Clearly our performance style has to change," Win said. "If you just say, 'This is our thing; this is what we do,' then it is shtick. So, yeah, we may be less intense with this material, although I suspect we'll always be pretty intense."

Win is six-foot-five, with coat-hanger shoulders and messy blond fly-away hair shaved to punk perfection around the ears. At 26, he has large, penetrating eyes and not even the shadow of a beard. Although he sings at times with a tight-throated, high-pitched fervor that brings to mind David Byrne with the Talking Heads, when he instructs the band, he tends to gather his thoughts in silence, then lay them out in quiet, commanding lines: "You need to tighten those runs and bring them down an octave or you're going to sound like Pat Metheny," he'll say to the string and brass players. Meanwhile, Régine, who is 30, with quick brown eyes and a pile of curly dark hair that reaches only to her husband's sternum, will riff excitedly on an idea for a guitar solo (Let it hang between the breaths of the melody ... like an — I don't know — like an airplane ... make it really fourth dimension!) and then, frustrated by her failures of metaphor, will rise onto her stockinged toes to dance the line of a lazy guitar lick that lingers behind a song's principal melody and — body suspended, then tripping forward — catches it just at the end. Most everyone associated with the Arcade Fire talks about the band's "democratic" and "communal" spirit; even the temporary string and horn players relish their autonomy and the chance to experiment creatively with their parts. "We're trying to bring something to people that we can do only as a group," Richie says. "If it works, that can — hopefully — balance any personal frictions that arise from a band made up of personalities that are so strong it can sometimes make you a little crazy. Most of the time it does. There's also a genuine lack of egotism in this band that serves us well; people get out of the way of an idea that's working. So it is an open democracy and a creative space. But at the end of the day, Win is very much the leader of this band — because of his strong personality, and the fact that he was founder and writes most of the songs. Win is King and Régine is Queen, and we all figure out the rest."

Win, who was raised in the Houston suburbs and arrived in Montreal after four years at Phillips Exeter and one at Sarah Lawrence, grew up playing guitar and listening to

Radiohead, the Pixies, the Smiths and the Cure. Régine, who was born in Montreal of Haitian parents, was studying jazz singing, playing mandolin in a medieval ensemble and doing compositional experiments with 15th-century music when the two met at McGill University.

Win: “We met in the school cafeteria. A week later I went to see her singing jazz. It was immediately obvious to me that she was a real singer. I even left before she was done. I didn’t need to see the rest; it was so obvious we needed to play together.”

Régine: “I remember he came one night to hear me sing, but he left before it was over — I thought he didn’t like it! And when I saw him later, I asked what he played, and when he said, ‘Oh, some guitar, a little piano,’ I thought: Bo-ring! Everyone plays a little guitar and piano! But right away, I was struck by the maturity of his songs. This was not just some dude noodling around on his guitar trying to impress me.”

Win: “We were coming from such different worlds, but when I played my stuff for her, right away she had ideas — for accordion, for all this weird medieval stuff.”

Régine: “I was from another planet. I didn’t even know what an ‘indie’ band was — it sounded so vague and mysterious. But Win wrote really good, catchy melodies (though with fairly typical chord changes, I thought), and right away I had all these ideas I wanted him to try: strange progressions, beats, instruments. And: enough with the acoustic guitar!”

Win: “We started playing together and went on a date that same night. It wasn’t like, this could work. It was more like, this does work. And we haven’t been apart for more than a week since.”

The Arcade Fire sound — catchy pop melodies and thick dissonances; raw, imperfect rock with flawless symphonic arrangements — originates with that pairing of Win’s indie roots and Régine’s classical training. But the exhilarating spectacle the band creates for its live shows arises from the conflagration of energies, the barely controlled chaos of seven precocious musicians, all of whom play multiple instruments (sometimes swapping between songs, sometimes swapping within songs) and who generate countermelodies, sonic textures and onstage interactions that are part riotous play, part unnerving provocation. There’s Richie, who plays bowed double bass and taught himself an idiosyncratic electric guitar (he appears to be wringing the neck of a dead chicken) and embraces the use of police sirens and megaphones; and Will, the technically dextrous, highly tactile keyboardist, who often leaves the ivories to bait Richie onstage, grabbing his friend’s double bass or drumming on his head with sticks or enacting various scenes of mock-torture; and Jeremy, the amply-tattooed heavy-metal enthusiast, who pummels the drums (or the piano when Régine takes a turn on percussion) with such ferocity that Win sometimes looks back and thinks Jeremy’s arms are going to snap right off.

Despite its exuberant, sometimes triumphalist sound, “Funeral” looked at the world lyrically through introspective and, at times, quite mournful eyes — its songs were about family, relationships and the tenuous bonds of community. With “Neon Bible,” Win and Régine have taken on larger themes, writing elliptical narratives about the ambivalence of faith, the challenge of living with fear and the possibility of apocalypse. Musically, their

writing has evolved as well: in addition to several numbers that, like their previous work, tilt toward bombast, “Neon Bible” includes a hymn (“Intervention”), some blues (“Antichrist Television Blues”), even an Appalachian-inflected ballad (“My Body Is a Cage”).

When the time came to record “Neon Bible,” the new material tested the band’s endurance and ingenuity. Although one song, “Black Wave/Bad Vibrations,” was a pure studio creation, a Frankenstein of overdubs, for all the other songs the band passed up the safety net of digital technology and recorded the so-called bed tracks with the band playing on the church stage and onto analog tape, thereby forcing everyone to commit to the intensity of a live performance from the start of each take to its end. “Not many bands record like that anymore,” says their engineer, Markus Dravs, who worked with Bjork in a similarly improvised live-in space in the Spanish mountains and was Brian Eno’s house engineer for four years. “But they embraced the chaos. They were like, Let’s everybody play in the room and throw mikes at it and see how it sounds! Let’s jump off a cliff and see what happens at the bottom!” On one song, the final vocal was the first one recorded: The band set up on the church stage; Win went outside onto the back steps with headphones and a mandolin and sang into the night.

After the musicians completed the initial tracks for each song, they proceeded to layer the album with some ambitious new sounds. For “The Well and the Lighthouse,” they wanted to distort the sound of Régine’s voice on the choruses, so Dravs figured out how to create a Buddy Holly-style tape delay of enormous proportions by feeding her voice again and again through the 24 heads of his sound deck, which kept extending the gap between the original vocal and its strange, degraded echo until he achieved the aural equivalent of a stadium full of spectators doing the wave. (Dravs: “This band’s very good at knowing what they want; they just haven’t read enough manuals.”) For “My Body Is a Cage” and “Intervention,” Win and Régine heard in their aural imaginations the sound of a mighty organ, so they rented the Saint-Jean-Baptiste church in Montreal with its 500-pipe instrument; after an engineer miked the entire place, Régine recorded the parts in a series of single takes (though there was a half-second delay between depressing the keys and the overwhelming sound it generated) while the band tracks played into her headphones. For “Black Mirror,” “Keep the Car Running” and “No Cars Go,” Win and Régine wanted a fuller sound than could be achieved by their own ragtag orchestra, so they went to Budapest (no union rules and a good rate on the Canadian dollar) and recorded their arrangements with a 60-piece orchestra and a military choir.

Four years ago, when the Arcade Fire first started performing its songs from “Funeral,” it took the band six months to create the kind of show that eventually brought it such renown. Now, with a highly anticipated album about to come out, a year of tour dates lined up and one night to go before they were to begin their five-show run in London, the musicians were still groping their way forward — trying to find portable (and performable) ways of recreating the symphonic richness of “Neon Bible” by reworking vocal approaches and instrumental arrangements and improvising new bits of theater. “I don’t think we’ve found our footing,” Richie said when the band finished rehearsing in the East London studio. “The old numbers know themselves as live songs, but the new ones still feel like young calves on weak legs.”

“Yeah, that was rough,” Will said. “The logistics get hard when the band swells to 10 or more.”

“O.K., so we were sweaty and jet-lagged,” Jeremy said. “But, ‘bad rehearsal, good show.’ Isn’t that what they always say?”

Outside St. John’s Church, in a lovely, tucked-away Georgian square, the line started forming at 4 o’clock for the 8 p.m. show, and when the audience finally filed into the majestic, high-ceilinged church and faced a stage packed with musical equipment, several megaphones on tripods and a red-velvet curtain draped in back with the projected image of a neon bible, Richie said he could feel it in his bones: “Seems like the crowd is as nervous as we are. This is a crowd with really high expectations; they want that cathartic experience. But they’re a little ahead of themselves; they don’t know the new songs; they don’t know how they’re going to get excited. You know: This will be awesome! But the unspoken message is: Hope so!”

The Arcade Fire — all 10 of them — entered from the back of the sanctuary (anything to break that barrier between performer and audience), and walked up the aisle, Win smiling and clapping and gesturing for everyone to get up on their feet. Right away the band ripped into the new material, going full-tilt at four new songs in a row, but even with Win attacking the vocals with his dangerous, stone-faced visage; and Régine holding her red-laced fingers up to the corners of her eyes like Cleopatra as she sang; and Will running back and forth beating a snare drum and throwing it up, end over end, something was missing the mark. The energy coming from the stage seemed to dissipate among the crowd; the sound was all low-register drums and bass, drowning out those obsessively arranged horns and violins; and when songs ended, the audience clapped enthusiastically, if a little too respectfully. Win acknowledged as much from behind his mike: “I guess it’s our own damn fault for playing in a church,” he said. “How are you? Good? Yeah, everything’s going good with us too: jet lag, antibiotics. ...” They played a 60-minute show and left the stage looking almost as uncertain as they did at the start.

As they were filing out of the sanctuary, however, the band briefly conferred, then took a spontaneous turn and headed for the church door. “Come outside!” Régine yelled to the crowd. And while the audience trailed after them onto the stone steps, the band collected around a megaphone and sang an unrehearsed acoustic version of “Wake Up,” its most popular song from “Funeral.” On disc, “Wake Up” is anthemic — U2 plays it over the loudspeakers before its shows; Madison Square Garden uses it to jazz up the crowd at Rangers’ games. Here, in the secluded, lamp-lit square, with their breath visible in the wintery night air, the musicians gave it an unexpected intimacy; with an accordion, a dobro and a tambourine, they looked like a circle of carolers, and before the first chorus ended, the band had the crowd in a sing-along.

If the Arcade Fire is confident about anything, it’s the value of a good piece of stagecraft and the ways that playing with it, riffing with it night after night before an audience, eventually helps the music begin to live and breathe. So the following night, instead of walking straight to the stage, the band started its show with its encore, gathering in the middle of the crowded sanctuary to reprise its acoustic performance of “Wake Up.” After the crowd reveled in this seemingly spontaneous gesture, the band members took the stage with purpose in their step. “We had a little problem last night with people thinking we were playing in a church,” Win said to the crowd. “People were quiet. A little too respectful. I’m here tonight to say: This nonaggression shall not stand!”

A few days earlier, not long after the Arcade Fire had arrived in London, Win was sitting in the lobby of the band's hotel, talking about the music he'd listened to growing up and how inspiring it was to watch his favorite artists evolve — Dylan giving up his [Woody Guthrie](#) imitation to find a mode of expression all his own, the Clash trying to sound like the Ramones and, in the course of failing, becoming unique. "Expression is where you define yourself as an artist," he said. "And expression always has to change."

Régine walked in, and for a moment the two started talking, worrying over some details about the following night's show. Then Win said: "When we were working on 'Neon Bible,' I had this dream — well, it was a nightmare, really. I had this image of being in a boat in the ocean in the middle of the night. I could feel the boat going up and down, but it was so black out there; I couldn't see anything."

"I had that experience, too," Régine said avidly. "I was backpacking once, going from France to Corsica at night, and I was at the top of a giant boat at 2 in the morning, everything so black, and me feeling so small. I remember thinking, If I fall in, I could so easily disappear!"

"It's funny how the word 'fear' can mean so many different things," Win went on. "There's a natural fear that's about self-preservation —"

"— yeah, the fear that makes you want to protect yourself and fight what's coming in," Régine said. "But then there's the fear that's bigger than yourself and makes you want to do things, be inventive."

"That's the fear that — rather than working to support the way you already are — makes you want to change."

Just then their assistant manager walked into the lobby and told them they'd better quit talking: they had a rehearsal in half an hour, and five shows to do that week.

Darcy Frey is a contributing writer and the author of "The Last Shot," and has written for the magazine on music, science and the environment.