

Western Herald – SATURDAY: Jeremy Porter & the Tucos bring unique genre blend to Kalamazoo

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Growing up in Marquette, Mich., Jeremy Porter was probably one of those guys who spent as much time listening to the radio and spinning records on the turntable as he did hitting the books. At 16, he helped launch one of the Upper Peninsula's first punk bands—called The Regulars—and instead of making curfew on Thursday nights, he spent them hanging out in 'juice joints,' cranking the amplifiers to capacity and, as his bio says, learning "what a rock bar smells like."



But while Porter's educators probably frowned on that sort of behavior, clearly Porter is getting the last laugh.

The singer/songwriter—who transplanted to the Detroit area back in the 80s—built a new trio called the Tucos in 2010, recruiting Jason Bowes (bass) and Gabriel Doman (drums) as his back-up. Almost three years later, the trio has supported nationally-recognized acts like Jesse Malin & the St. Mark's Social and Whitey Morgan & The 78's and brought their unique blend of 70s power pop, 80s punk rock and 90s alt-country to bars and clubs all over the midwest.

On Saturday night, the Tucos will hit the stage at Louie's Trophy House in Kalamazoo to support their excellent new full-length, *Partner in Crime*.

Porter's influences are rich and varied, all manifesting themselves at some point during *Partner in Crime*'s 46-minute runtime. The slick and hooky power pop of Cheap Trick is instantly evident on the record's one-two punch opening of "Castaways" and "Little Miss Awesome." Moments later, "Pizza Girl" blends tongue-in-cheek pop sensibility with honky-tonk, bar-band blues, while "Goddamn Thing" and "Make Out Ming," change the mood further, kicking up the distortion and paying homage to *Let it Be*-era Replacements.

But while Porter certainly has a knack for penning hooks, as well as a strong emotional attachment to the more spontaneous punk sound he grew up listening to, the finest moments of *Partner in Crime* are those laced with alt-country and Americana. Late album triumphs like "Wandering Eye," "Barely All the Time" and the title track take the album to the next level, bursting with gorgeous, dusky instrumentation and weightier lyrical content. The songs also display Porter's adoration for alt-country players like Gram Parsons, Waylon Jennings and Whiskeytown (Ryan Adams' first band)—an ingredient he says didn't sink into his songwriting until the country and folk music resurgence of the 1990s.

"Somewhere about 15 to 20 years ago, it kind of got cool to like country music again," Porter said. "Two big things happened: first, people realized what a badass Johnny Cash was. Social Distortion probably had something to do with that, with their cover of 'Ring of Fire.' And second, bands like Uncle Tupelo or Jason and the Scorchers came along and sort of bucked the rock 'n' roll trends of the time."

He's not wrong: while Nirvana was in the midst of their meteoric rise and fall, the newly-born grunge genre following in their footsteps, alt-country music and roots rock were carving out a mainstream niche of their own. Twangy rock bands like Counting Crows and the Wallflowers became overnight successes on the radio waves, while classic country artists gained new respect from the generation that had spent most of the 80s listening to synth-pop, hair metal and punk rock. So while Porter admits that putting punk and alt-country into a melting pot results in an album with a lot of different directions and moods, he also believes that most people have gotten to the point where they're ready to embrace both sides of the musical coin.

"It is a bit of an identity crisis," Porter said. "We do kind of go back and forth [in our songwriting], and people don't always know what to make of that, but I think there are a lot of people now who are kind of into both of those things."

Still though, while Porter may be a musical journeyman, with a sound resting largely in the disparate styles and influences of the past, he certainly isn't the only one. In the past decade or so, a whole rock 'n' roll scene has sprung up around old heroes like Bruce Springsteen, the Clash and the Replacements, from the Hold Steady to the Gaslight Anthem, and Porter fits into that scene effortlessly. In February of 2011, Porter and the Tucos even got to warm up the stage for another modern classic rocker: Jesse Malin.

"That was our third show. We opened up for him in Detroit," Porter said. "I had really loved his most recent record, so I was pretty excited about that. It was the middle of February and there was this massive blizzard, but [Jesse] still brought a bunch of people out to see the show. It was really cool to be on same bill as him. He was just a friendly guy, one of those guys who you can tell just loves music."

For Porter, opening for an artist whose records he owns and listens to frequently was a surreal experience, but Malin's most significant influence on *Partner in Crime* came separately.

"He's got a song on [his *Love it to Life*] record called "Lonely at Heart," Porter said. "And I was listening to the record when it came out and I thought he was saying, 'you owe me a heart.' Then I realized that wasn't what he was saying and thought, 'well hell, if he's not using it, I'm going to!' And that became the last song on our record."

Jeremy Porter & the Tucos will be joined on the Saturday night bill by local fixtures Free Life and Kalamazoo River Monsters. Porter noted that audiences can expect a fast, fun and refreshing night of music, doubling as a tour through the last four or five decades of rock 'n' roll.

"It'll be a lot of stuff off our new record, some a little twangy, some a little punky," he said. "It'll be high-energy and fun: no bullshit, no schtick. Just guitars and energy and songs."

Interested in checking out the show? Head to the Louie's [Facebook page](#) to learn more, or visit Porter's [website](#) to hear some music. Admission for the show is only \$5, and music is set to begin at 10 p.m.