

Brother's Keeper

By Ryan Berg

A quiet Canadian winter night. In this neighborhood of snow-covered homes and corner markets, the old church in the middle of the block was an unlikely venue for a recording studio. There was no indication that inside three men were toiling to record a song. Tensions were running high as Bill McCarthy sang the vocal track into the microphone, his breath visible from the glacial cold of the studio. When McCarthy and Eric Sanderson arrived from New York the night before to work with renowned indie rock producer Dave Newfeld, best known for his work with Broken Social Scene, they were eager to see where he'd push the music. With their band, Pela, now defunct, and their new project, Augustines, not yet named or fully realized, the musicians were in limbo. The track they'd come to record was "Book of James", the final song to be written and recorded for the album *Rise Ye Sunken Ships*. After two years of struggle everything was riding on what would happen at Newfeld's studio. The quality of the work was a kind of litmus test to see if *Rise* would ever see the light of day.

"We had no idea what his process was," Sanderson said, while discussing the recording session over coffee months later in Brooklyn. "We arrived late at night and talked until maybe three in the morning. Billy and I woke up the next day at ten ready to work but we had to wait for Dave who didn't wake up until twelve or something. We sat around while he had breakfast, coffee. Finally, sometime in the afternoon, we went into the studio."

What McCarthy and Sanderson didn't know was that after they had gone to bed the night before, Newfeld stayed up recording a new drumbeat for the song, scrapping what they had brought in with them on the demo.

"He warned us we were going to hate it," McCarthy said. "But to be patient."

What they heard was jarring and not at all what they expected.

"He was going for this Motown-y thing, making it really percussion-heavy," McCarthy said as his fists clenched summoning back some of the frustration of the moment. "I didn't understand what he was doing."

Even though they were unsure about the drumbeat, they continued to follow Newfeld's lead. He'd produced some of the most memorable records of the last few years and his unconventional method had worked in the past.

As the recording process progressed Newfeld continued to confound the musicians with his unorthodox approach.

"I was going through the song on my electric guitar when it was unplugged and out of tune. I didn't even know he was recording," McCarthy said. "Somehow that ended up on the mix."

Throughout the three-day session McCarthy and Sanderson played all the instrumental parts to the song but when they heard it played back to them, the vibe seemed all wrong.

Time was running short. McCarthy and Sanderson had scrounged together enough money for only three days of recording with Newfeld. As the second day closed it was looking more and more like the song wouldn't be finished.

While McCarthy was starting to show his frustration Sanderson was trying to work as a mediator. He stayed up late at night with Newfeld, working meticulously to move the process forward. During the day he tried to stall McCarthy's growing frustration but the strain of the session was obvious to everyone.

"At one point [Newfeld] kicked us out of the studio so he could get back to work with Tony," [Larking - the drummer Dave brought in for the session]," Sanderson said.

Eventually the aggravation became too much to take for McCarthy. He was afraid his song was straying too far away from his original vision. In hopes of salvaging the record, he cornered the producer.

"I told him, 'Dave, this isn't about you, man,'" McCarthy said. "And he looked right at me and said 'Bill, it's not about you either. It's about making a good song.'"

Newfeld continued to push forward undeterred.

When the three days of recording were up, McCarthy and Sanderson left Newfeld's church studio with only half of the song showing its shape. The second half was nothing more than a bare vocal track.

Newfeld told the musicians they could always come back to finish. But the truth was, they couldn't. They weren't able to afford it. The "Book of James" sessions that were supposed to be the catalyst to finally finishing the record felt like yet another sign that *Rise* was destined to flounder.

"I was raging the whole drive back to New York. The entire trip felt futile. I don't think I stopped railing on until we hit the U.S. border," McCarthy said.

The protective attitude McCarthy had towards “Book of James” was not only about preserving the integrity of the composition. For McCarthy it resonated much more personally. The song was written about his younger brother, Jim, who, battling drug addiction for much of his life, had been living in homeless shelters and on the streets of California since high school. As Jim grew older his mental state deteriorated. McCarthy tried again and again to help his brother. With his older sister, they attempted to place Jim in a psychiatric hospital. At one point McCarthy even paid for Jim to come stay with him in New York in order to get back on his feet but his brother’s condition was more volatile than he could handle and he returned to California.

One day, at a shelter where he was living, Jim attacked and seriously wounded a worker with a knife. While being held in prison he was diagnosed as schizophrenic, deemed unfit to stand trial and too dangerous to be housed with the general population. For four years he was placed in solitary confinement and remained there with only brief respites to psych hospitals where he was able to have contact with others. While residing at one of those hospitals Jim overheard he was to be remanded to solitary confinement and began to panic. Three days later McCarthy received a phone call from a legal advocate lawyer saying that Jim had hung himself.

The tragedy of Jim’s death was not foreign territory for McCarthy. Growing up, his mother was also diagnosed as schizophrenic. Unable to provide for her children, the state took them away from her. None of her children knew their father. The boys lived out much of their youth in foster care. When McCarthy was nineteen years old his mother, after years of struggling with chemical dependency and psychic deterioration, ended her life by overdosing on painkillers and cocaine. Her body was discovered on a

cot in a homeless shelter. Next to her was a business card from the local mortuary, her children's names scrawled across the back.

“She was really sick but trying to help us with the process,” McCarthy said.

He was sent to retrieve her belongings from the shelter.

“I found crack pipes and four packs of generic cigarettes. It broke my heart.”

McCarthy had been writing music for only a couple of years by the time his mother took her own life. Her mental illness and death were subjects he tried to tackle, but unsuccessfully.

“I lost my mom when I was nineteen,” he said. “So trying to address the subject in songwriting was fairly bad. Not in bad taste. I just lacked the vocabulary and subtlety wasn't my friend.”

Pela was still together when McCarthy attempted again to write songs about how mental illness tore through his family. More than ten years later, his brother, still alive at the time, became the central character. McCarthy mined the interior world of memory and what surfaced was a collection of twilight, soulfully charged songs that threaded together like chapters in a novel. Images swirl through the lyrics, the gritty, forgotten corners of New York and L.A., flickering lights of TV sets and state psychiatric hospitals, neglected family photo albums and 99 cent stores, dashboard Marias and road trips to Mexico in search of a father. The songs wrestle with McCarthy's thematic preoccupation of trying to keep his brother afloat amid the reckless waters of psychosis. In the song “Augustines,” he pleads with Jim, “Keep your head up kid/ I know you can swim/ But ya gotta move your legs.”

McCarthy and his band mates in Pela began to shape the songs into what would eventually become *Rise Ye Sunken Ships*. Building on the momentum of the band's first release *Anytown Graffiti* and the subsequent tour they set out to Los Angeles to record the new album.

Sanderson and McCarthy stayed in a cheap motel. Guitarist Nate Martinez and drummer Tomislav Zovich were staying with the producer and his wife along with another band. The recording sessions were often times grueling. The band worked seventeen days straight before their first day off, the last of which ended in a booze-filled marathon. In his studio blog McCarthy wrote: "We sure tied one on last night. [The producer] kicked me out of the vocal booth at some point. I was too sloppy. My vocal take was pretty much a nose-dive."

Although some songs were beginning to gel, with the raucous velocity of rockers like "Philadelphia" and mid-tempo ballads like "East Los Angeles", the recording would not come easy. In the end the band was underwhelmed with the results.

Pela returned to New York and decided to start over.

"We had to do it twice because it just wasn't strong," Sanderson said.

The decision to re-record was easier said than done.

Still in contract with the label that put out *Anytown Graffiti* Pela found themselves up against a wall. Despite Pela bringing them their greatest success to date, the label refused to provide more money for the project. When it became clear that they were to receive negligible support, Pela made a bold move and decided to step outside of the industry model.

Sanderson's father-in-law invested in the band. He made it clear that this was not a loan but a business decision. A contract and budget were written up to include everything up to remixing the album.

The band scrapped 80 percent of what was initially recorded and with Sanderson's step-father's backing they worked prodigiously on re-recording, editing and producing the album themselves. Then, a month was spent arranging. The final step was to have the album mixed. They had sent a demo to Newfeld who liked it enough to agree to do the project.

At their manager's prompting, Zovich took out a significant loan in order to buy the band out of the contract with their label. While the band worked on the album the manager was working at securing a new record deal. Each member of the band had received only \$800 from *Anytown Graffiti* sales and a silent shrug from label executives when they asked why so little. The hand-to-mouth existence they all lived in order to be a band was becoming more and more difficult to maintain and the Lads, as they were informally known, hoped *Rise* could land them a more lucrative deal. Within the two years it took to record and re-record the album two members of the band got married. The urge for a little security was beginning to show.

The boys in Pela had been close to success before. Industry folks had assured them of the inevitable record deals and hefty advances that would come their way. After a few burns they learned to become wary of too-good-to-be-true promises.

But the suggestions of success weren't unwarranted. Pela sold out shows in nine cities across the country. They played major music festivals like Sasquatch, shared stages with Sonic Youth, Sleater Kinney, Feist, Flaming Lips, among others. Pela's songs

appeared in TV shows such as *Scrubs*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Veronica Mars*. Their album *Anytown Graffiti* sold 10,000 copies, a minor success considering the scant marketing push it received from a fledgling label. Anyone could see there was a fan base growing. They even did a taping as musical guests for an episode of the *Jimmy Fallon Show*. The Lads seemed poised for success.

Initially when *Rise* was shopped around the response was encouraging. Labels threw around figures that would make most bands smile. But each time negotiations got underway the inexplicable happened. Nearly green-lighted record deals collapsed in the final moments before signing. The band demanded answers from their manager, who was responsible for the negotiations, and listened warily as he gave them a list of excuses. Talks with the labels had been bungled and there was nothing they could do. Bound by contractual agreements to their manager they watched as promises of advances disappeared and personal debt piled higher by the day.

By the time the last record deal fell through and their manager was fired, the members of *Pela* had worked exhaustively for 24 months on *Rise*.

It's then McCarthy received the phone call from California.

A legal advocate lawyer was on the other end of the receiver telling McCarthy his brother had committed suicide. The news left McCarthy an exposed, raw nerve. His band mates pooled money together for a plane ticket and McCarthy flew out to California to collect what was left of his brother.

At the hospital where Jim had died McCarthy was once again faced with the cold and ugly reality of the system in which he was raised. The hospital director seemed

indifferent towards McCarthy, who demanded answers about how this could happen with such tight psychological supervision. McCarthy was curtly informed that Jim's body would be turned over but his file would remain confidential. A box— filled with Jim's sneakers, boxers, wristwatch and hospital ID—was the only physical proof left that Jim had ever existed. Angered, McCarthy demanded to see Jim's commissary, hoping to find some clues as what had happened, but the director refused to hand it over. It became obvious that the hospital was more concerned about being sued than providing the bereaved the essential information needed to properly mourn.

McCarthy left the hospital with his brother's cremated body and few possessions.

No one showed up for the funeral, not even the foster parents who housed them as children. McCarthy took his brother's ashes to the backyard of one of the homes they shared together. Behind it there was a creek where he planned to spread Jim's remains.

"I was about to open the bag when this Russian guy comes riding up on his motorcycle," McCarthy said.

The man was the current owner of the house and wanted to know what McCarthy was doing on his property. McCarthy tried to explain but the only words he could utter were, "My brother," as he lifted the ashes as evidence.

The Russian revved his engine and squealed his tires in the driveway as McCarthy said his goodbyes, releasing his brother's remains into the tiny creek where they used to play together as children.

When McCarthy returned to New York Pela reconvened and began rehearsing for an upcoming gig opening for Sonic Youth in Seattle, but something wasn't right. Instead

of focusing on running through their songs they were distracted by drunken jam sessions, playing mock reggae and sloppy blues metal.

“I remember Tommy doing these hilarious, over the top drum fills when I was trying to be serious singing,” McCarthy said.

Focus seemed to be waning but no one was discussing why. At one point McCarthy looked around the rehearsal space and, as he put it, “everyone was shit-faced drunk and I walked out all pissed off to smoke.”

When asked why he was upset he said, “I find it strange that we’re sharing a stage with Sonic Youth in front of thousands of people this weekend and no one gives a shit.”

On the way out to Seattle the atmosphere was somber.

“I remember being on the plane, drunk on bad wine, looking at the guys wondering if we’d ever travel again together.” Sanderson said. “It was such a confusing time. I should have been excited for the show, I should have been thrilled that NPR just did a feature on us, but I couldn’t feel it.”

After the show, back in New York, there was little to look forward to. They were still tangled in a web of bad business contracts and the task of freeing themselves of it all seemed insurmountable.

“We were pinned down by total soulless pro music business types...and crumbling internally,” McCarthy said.

Many bands, similar to Pela, having garnered rave reviews for their live shows and independent releases find it difficult to cement a substantial deal with a record label. Out of the frustration of constant touring, the accruing debt and the personal pressures one levies at oneself to succeed, many bands end up splitting. Pela was no different.

They disbanded, leaving an album, one that they all had invested so much in, unfinished. After almost a decade together the Lads went their separate ways.

“Everyone walked away, just wasted,” McCarthy said.

“The thing that finally broke up the band, was probably the thing that breaks up every band. For eight years we never really fought. Sure we had disagreements, but we always talked them out. Our friendship was our greatest strength; it was the thing that kept us together while so many of our friend’s bands called it quits. But in those last few weeks our strong personal bond cracked and we fought amongst ourselves. The minute that happened, the band was over,” Sanderson said.

Both McCarthy and Sanderson admitted they began drinking heavily when the band broke up, isolating themselves from everyone. What they were experiencing felt like a kind of divorce.

“We were grieving,” Sanderson said.

McCarthy tried to move on, worked odd jobs, but couldn’t get the record out of his mind. Especially now that Jim was gone *Rise Ye Sunken Ships* seemed like a way to validate his brother’s life.

“After Jim died,” McCarthy confessed, “the album took on crazy meaning.”

He and Sanderson had never stopped talking. They both felt that after two years of working to reinvent the record, it deserved to be finished no matter what, but they were unsure about how to release it. After dealing with bad managers, conniving lawyers, and an unfair label for the better part of a decade they had no interest in participating in that world anymore.

“They all professed to be ‘one of the good guys,’” McCarthy said. “And they all vanished within weeks of us breaking up. Never to be heard from again except for money.”

McCarthy turned his focus solely on the record. Still raw from his brother’s death, he locked himself in a closet and banged out “Book of James”.

Conversations with Sanderson continued and before long the talks shifted from music to the mirrored experiences of their families. Much like McCarthy, Sanderson’s family had a history of substance abuse.

“It isn’t healthy to pretend like this doesn’t exist,” Sanderson said. “Truth is I come from a house full of alcoholism and substance abusers and some level of openness about that is important and healthy.”

The coincidences in their stories were hard to ignore. Both had brothers named James who ended up in solitary confinement, their lives shattered by addiction; mothers with similar ideation. Then there was the eerie zodiac correlation. McCarthy and his brother Jim shared the same August birthday. Sanderson’s was 24 hours later.

Before long McCarthy and Sanderson bandied questions back and forth about how they’d move forward with the album. How would they define themselves? Without Martinez and Zovich they were no longer Pela. Would they work as a two-piece? How could they possibly finance releasing an album? If one of them began to feel unsure about resurrecting *Rise* the other would bolster his resolve. But with all the questions posited before them, one thing was clear: they would not work with a record company on this project.

On the strength of the demo they sent him, Newfeld agreed to record “Book of James.” Unsure how they were going to proceed with the project but knowing that they had to do something, they picked up the pieces of the abandoned Pela album, the new song “Book of James” and made their way to Canada.

Three days later they returned chest-fallen from their confusing recording experience.

“I was pretty depressed after we returned from Canada,” Sanderson said. “I couldn’t justify not being happy anymore. I was reconsidering my decision to jump into this again.”

The time up north seemed to be yet another obstacle in a sea of deterrents.

But then Newfeld surprised McCarthy and Sanderson with a copy of the finished “Book of James.” They were awestruck.

“I was rendered comment-less,” McCarthy said. “And that’s difficult to do.”

“When we got the track back I was brought tears, but I was also pissed,” Sanderson said. “Now I couldn’t walk away.”

Both McCarthy and Sanderson were humbled by Newfeld’s production of the song. What seemed like a disparate collection of odd sounds and strange snippets during the recording session had been masterfully aligned. Newfeld added flourishes of Autoharp, brass, and slide guitar to fill out the track. As a nod to the musicians, the song ends with the original drumbeat from the demo that they arrived with in Canada.

At first listen it became obvious that something fairly profound had taken place. The making of *Rise Ye Sunken Ships*, with its clear beginning and vast ocean of middle, had finally found its stories’ end with “Book of James”.

“There’s a moment of peace in the first chorus where everything goes quiet,” McCarthy said, speaking of Newfeld’s production of the song. “Within all the noise and chaos,” McCarthy said, shaking his head, “he was able to find that peacefulness and that’s exactly what the song’s about.”

McCarthy and Sanderson were eager to share the track and get to work on releasing the album but without managers and record label executives vying for a listen, what was the next step? There wasn’t even a band to tour and promote the material. Little precedent existed for musicians wanting to work outside of the system of labels, managers and lawyers.

“We knew that we wanted to proceed independently, but actually taking that on was a whole other challenge.” Sanderson said.

Enter John Richards and Amy Lindsey.

Richards, a DJ and program producer for Seattle based independent radio station KEXP, was a major supporter of Pela’s work. Richards also set the band up with many of their Northwest gigs.

Lindsey met the band when she worked at the station as a concert producer and kept in touch when she left to start her own company. Her belief in community and artistry always stood out to the band.

When they heard about McCarthy and Sanderson’s dilemma distributing *Rise* without the aid of a record label, they encouraged the duo to continue to think outside the box.

“They showed us there are other ways to get our record out there. They were really creative in their suggestions. They mentioned a listener supported model, for example,” Sanderson said.

Having the support and encouragement of Richards and Lindsay emboldened the two musicians. Thinking of new approaches to releasing the record was appealing to McCarthy and Sanderson. The record industry had made it clear that there were little incentives for signing with a label other than upfront cash and marketing assistance. Instead of relying on industry insiders who couldn’t care less about the music, they could work with people from the music community who demonstrated a real appreciation for their work.

They decided to name the project Augustines, after one of the songs on the album, and began to see themselves as a part of a larger music community.

While progress was being made with Richards and Lindsey on how *Rise* would be released, McCarthy and Sanderson made a pretty radical decision for rock musicians. They quit drinking.

Tony Fitzpatrick is to thank for that. McCarthy met Fitzpatrick at his gallery show in New York and the two hit it off immediately. They began talking about the struggles of making art in a world that does not value what you do unless dollar signs were attached. Fitzpatrick introduced McCarthy to Steve Earle, his longtime friend and collaborator and McCarthy’s personal songwriting hero. McCarthy knew Earle’s biography, his reputation for growing up as a wild child, his trouble with family, how he left home at an early age. McCarthy also knew about Earle’s early career struggles and

his battle with drugs and alcohol. McCarthy saw himself in Earle's story. At the gallery show Fitzpatrick and Earle talked to McCarthy about the problems they encountered in the music and art worlds.

“At one point Tony said ‘this conversation isn’t about if you’re an artist, it’s about what you’re going to do about it,’” McCarthy said.

Fitzpatrick suggested he quit drinking.

The idea was contrary to much of his experience in Pela. The Lads were known to throw a few back. They boasted that no one could out-drink the band. They never played a show sober. If McCarthy felt a rattle in his throat he’d blow his voice out on purpose. Drunkenness with a self-destructive edge was deeply fixed in his concept of the rock ‘n’ roll identity.

With a startling simplicity Fitzpatrick cautioned against the rock lifestyle that McCarthy had sought out for so many years.

“You’re human and will break down,” Fitzpatrick said. “ Be careful what you dream to be, you might become it someday.”

The consequences of substance abuse had played itself out in both McCarthy and Sanderson’s families, to devastating degrees. The idea that it could play a part in hindering their own progress as artists was unacceptable.

“I found [their] ‘no drinking’ stance to be critical to me surviving this period as an artist,” McCarthy said. Sanderson agreed.

“We know it’s not a sexy topic. Not very rock ‘n’ roll,” Sanderson said. “But we don’t care.”

The youthful posturing of a rock star was starting to lose its luster, but not entirely.

“It’s still one of my dreams to do a stage dive,” Sanderson said, “but I’ll have a knee brace on when I do it.”

McCarthy and Sanderson perched themselves on a bench in front of a local coffee shop, watched as a Mexican woman struggled to get her dog to walk on a leash. The sun had set and a blue twilight washed over Brooklyn.

They had just returned from a meeting with Richards and Lindsey about Augustines and seemed enthused. After a long, arduous road, the album was finally finished. Now the logistical work of releasing it had begun but they didn’t seem stressed.

For both McCarthy and Sanderson *Rise Ye Sunken Ships* is about perseverance. With all the roadblocks they’ve encountered along the way they knew this album never would have made it without their tenacious streak and unwavering belief in the material.

“I mean I didn’t want to have a record called *Rise* that sank,” McCarthy says, with a casual flick of his cigarette. “It needed to get out there.”

In many ways *Rise Ye Sunken Ships* is also about reclaiming agency in one’s own life. From beleaguered family histories, from systems that ignore and shut down the individual, be it a record label, the foster care system, the prison system or a psychiatric hospital. The song “Book of James” is, specifically, testament to that struggle.

McCarthy and Sanderson never said why they used such religiously charged language on the album. Did they know St. Augustine wrote about his embattled past in order to step into the present? Or that one of the key verses of Book of James in the Bible

is “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

Chances are, no. But the gist certainly wouldn't be lost on them. These boys are no strangers to coincidence.