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DECEMBER 14, 2006

Best Indie Rock Band: School of Athens

BY [ERIK PRICE](#)

When *City Paper* readers voted School of Athens Pittsburgh's Best Indie Rock Band of 2006, I figured I should give these guys a listen. I checked out its live set on WYEP, caught some free tracks on MySpace. With a little taste of its seemingly incongruous blend of metal and piano-centered pop melodies to whet my appetite, I knew I had to see this act live. Where does one go to see a band so forward-thinking, so ambitious, so avant?

This particular week, you'd head over to a little bar on the South Side where, one night a week, a midget runs up and down the bar, snatching wadded-up bills from patrons' hands while pouring shots into their thirsty, waiting mouths.

Everything about School of Athens, it would seem, is a contradiction.

The band consists of lead singer and pianist Drew Fogle and drummer Mike Rush, both of McKees Rocks. They're joined by bassist Johnny Naples and guitarist Neal Rosenblat, both of Sheraden. That geographical diversity, band members say, is itself something of an oddity.

"Normally, people from Sheraden and McKees Rocks don't really get along," explains Naples. "All through high school, it was like we fought kids from Crafton and Sheraden. So we're bridging the gap. It's humanitarian."

While the guys in School of Athens may have seen each other at a rumble or two back in high school, it wasn't until Fogle returned from Mercyhurst College with four years of vocal training under his belt that the band began to take shape.

There were some minor lineup changes in the beginning, but the current incarnation has been together for just under two years, and it seems to be the magic combination the band was looking for.

"It's amazing how well we play together," says Fogle. "Anytime Johnny plays a bass line, Neal plays a guitar part or Mike plays a drum part, it's like they're somehow playing the best part that I've ever heard in my life. And it just works."

It's the way those parts come together that may just be the most interesting contradiction in the School of Athens experience.

Rush's drum-clobbering and Naples' bass lines provide a solid, driving rhythm beneath Fogle's rollicking piano work and dying-to-be-Rufus-Wainright vocals. Rosenblat's atmospheric, effect-heavy leads create a moodiness in each song, making the sound as schizophrenic as possible. But it does work.

Songwriting duties are shared equally by all four band members, which could explain the broad shifts of sound and structure from one song to the next. The stutter-step beat of crowd favorite "Blues in D Minus," for example, is a

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vast departure from the straight-ahead, frantic pace of songs like "Manuscript." If it weren't for Fogle's vocals soaring through each song, you'd swear you were listening to two different bands.

"The songs sound different depending on who came up with the root idea," says Naples. "It's kind of a tell. The instrument that starts off the song is usually the guy who came up with the idea."

What it all amounts to is an ambitious attempt to blend the band's more inaccessible indie-rock tendencies with various radio-pop influences like System of a Down or Coldplay. And the resulting hybrid puts School of Athens at an interesting point on Pittsburgh's musical landscape.

"I don't think we sound like anyone else around here, and to go into a bar and say, 'Hey, you want to listen to us play piano and sing real pretty?' That can be a little tricky," says Naples.

As tricky as that question may seem for School of Athens — judging by the fans singing along at the shows and the opinion of *CP* readers — the answer is "yes."

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