

**Montreal
locals at large**
Jamie O'Meara

hour

You don't know Jack

"I've got to watch what I say when I'm talking to you," laughs Jack Nicholls over the phone. "I feel like we're just sitting down having a beer." Intoxicating



conversationalist though I may be, the relaxed atmosphere has everything to do with Nicholls, a battle-scarred - though still devilishly handsome - veteran of Montreal's music scene.

The easy-going, highly approachable Nicholls has made a respected name for himself over the years, both as a musician (he fronted volatile pot-punk, ...er, pop-punk quadruped Atomic Folk through their best years) and a designer (for example, he did all the logos, T-shirts and artwork for my last band, Rise, helping out to such an extent that, no shit, our second album, Jack, is named after him). It comes as little surprise that the prolific Nicholls would continue to stalk his muse post-Folk, though the sombre tones and dripping, rootsy, boozy melancholy of his new Moonshine Orchestra are somewhat removed from the air-raid rock of his previous lives.

"I just left the anger at the door," says Nicholls nonchalantly. "Atomic Folk was all dissolved, but I was still writing songs. I was into supercharged, high-energy rock, but all the while I was writing pretty mellow stuff.... (The aforementioned Paul Julius, also ex-Atomic Folk) listened to some of it and said 'This is great - you should be putting as much effort into this as you put into your hockey team.'"

I like to think of Nicholls as the Ron Francis of rock: experienced, patient, deadly out in front and above all loyal, which explains why he's been awarded with the support of both family and long-time friends, like recording engineer/multi-instrumentalist Claus Frostell. Nicholls and Frostell are the collaborative producing nucleus of Moonshine Orchestra (a loose collective based on Nicholls' songwriting). They have just released, following an EP last year, their debut full-length, Hero Stories.

"Claus and I have been really good friends since he was in The Vegetables and I was in The Drones back in our John Abbott days," says Nicholls, adding that the relationship has a certain catalytic element to it. "In the studio we fight a lot and get into great discussions, which has a lot to do with his, let's say, 'Finnish' perspective, as well as my loosey-goosey air-headedness."

The recording of Hero Stories began in Frostell's apartment (the "Claüs Haüs") where the multitasking and superconnected Fin logician "just started bringing in everyone he knows, like John Davis from The Gruesomes, and Kim Ho, who used to play with P.E.Z.," says Nicholls appreciatively.

"I've always had loads of songs, and I probably have four albums in the can ready to go. Claus just picked a pile of them and made it cohesive. The only thing he said was 'no electric guitars,' and there aren't. Well, we do cheat a little here and there..."

So where does all the heavy-heartedness come from? "It's all for the babes."

That's my boy.

It isn't nearly as down at the mouth as you might expect, however. A genius I know once described their sound as what Kurt Cobain would have been doing had he allowed himself to get older and step back from life a little, a brilliant description I applaud and endorse. Nicholls, however, is more modest in his characterization.

"I guess I'd call it non-assaulting. In Atomic Folk, we used to be told that we assaulted the senses and were about as much fun as Rush," he laughs. "This is a bit more pleasant, with a bit more smiling and a bit more groove. I think it also has more of an immediate appeal - you can hear everything and the players are great."