

VIETNAM



“There was nothing mediocre. People either really got it or they really

hated it—nothing in between. Pure rage or pure love.” —JOSH GRUBB

For the moment, Vietnam lives in a streetfront apartment on a corner of Williamsburg that looks gray no matter what season it is. The glass front has been painted over and the door is always open, and much of the time there are friends and neighbors and girlfriends and cats wandering in and out of the living room. Michael Gerner, the band's guitar player, principal songwriter and vocalist, sits here with Michael Penn, the drummer, and Ivan Berio, the bassist. Joshua Grubb, who plays lead guitar and sings on several songs, divides his time between his parent's place in rural Pennsylvania and the couch in the living room. Gerner and Grubb think they will probably find a place together sometime soon, but for most of the year they have all lived in the apartment together—a mosaic of converted bedrooms with bunkbeds and broken candles and writing on the walls. Gerner and Grubb have spent much of their time together mowing between Austin, Philadelphia and New York—living with friends or in dilapidated green homes or short-term rentals—resacrating each time

Mike Penn, drummer

in an effort to finally find some space to make music or out of frustration with wherever they were or just to save some dollars in the hopes of one day moving to LA. Several years ago, the two moved to South Williamsburg and found a last minute sublet from a guy who was leaving the country to film a documentary. According to Gerner, all they had to do was water the plants and pay their rent money up front. They did—and then the electricity got turned off, the gas got turned off, and the water got turned off. Gerner and Grubb were only subsisting for two and a half months; nothing was in their name and they didn't want to pay the deposits to get everything turned back on. So, as Gerner says, “We just lived without all that shit. We had candles and there was a beloved Chinese restaurant up the street and we'd drink Coke. I'd take showers at people's houses or at work—you know, those sink showers.” Sometime before that, the two lived in a three-bed bunk up in Long Island City. Gerner continues, “There was this girl who lived there, who was never there—she was a prostitute. We met her the first night and she had just gotten out of a hotel for the three days, she had been raped and sodomized and shit. It was real intense—everyone was running around wasted and naked and it was real dark and it felt real dirty.”

Michael Gerner, lead vocals, guitar

Vietnam came of age in a post-9/11 New York City that was filled with hedonism and despair. Williamsburg was not quite yet synonymous with treatment centers in repressed teens, and homemade haircuts and girls who wore boots with shorts still had a bit of edge to them. Vice Records—a new offshoot of the much maligned and adored publication—still had to prove why it existed. The Return of New York Rock and electroclash had both eaten themselves (or were at least on demand), and Vietnam, two guys with beards playing druggo, treated out, blues-inflected manufacturing rock music, was some shit from outer space. The first Vietnam shows were in and around Brooklyn and sometimes headed up to night people, including (according to their semi-official bio) a “new media executive” on sax. The very first Vietnam show was Gerner and some friends playing under the moniker High Society, opening a show in Greenpoint, Brooklyn (call it: Enuff for someone named Eleanor Friedberg, who was performing on the They Famous. High Society didn't last long, but the song “Summer in the City” performed that night, would make its way into Vietnam's canon. Gerner and Grubb first met each other in Austin, Texas, where Gerner was graduating from the University of Texas and Grubb was hanging out,

sometimes taking classes, other times working at a local gas station. “Michael looked really weird, like a mod from another planet,” explains Friedberg, who was also a student at UT at the time. “He had this really clean, severe haircut and he would always wear tight black pants and button-down shirts.” Gerner's most well-known non-de tune was Julius Seboun, under which he played keyboard and sang occasionally for a well-loved local band called the Primadonnas. “He was an idol of mine,” says Grubb—and though Gerner says of his first meeting with Grubb, “I didn't like him,” he adds, “I think that's most people's first impression. Josh is kind of like a bitter fruit. You have to get used to him, and a lot of people don't taste things twice. He never backs down—he's completely honest. He would die for you and what you're doing, as long as he feels that it's mutual.” In the Primadonnas and in later bands, Gerner performed surreal stage antics: putting televisions running videos of a performance on stage in lieu of playing a live set, or jumping out of a brown duster with his fellow bandmates, wearing white suits covered in blood. Despite this, Grubb was—and still is—the rambunctious wild child, getting into fistfights and mouthing off whatever to whomever, whenever. Gerner radiates a magnetic calmness, a self-contained tranquility that is at odds with—and a result

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