

Rock Solid

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By Scott Smith

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Photos By Kaia Larsen • Times Record

One Fort Smith-based rock band is lunging up to a higher, more spiritual plane these days, summoning the adventurous playing skills of their musical heroes while never losing focus of their mission.

Young Earth, a Christian group comprised of vocalist Chuck Law, guitarist David Wallimann, keyboardist Bill Rebsamen and drummer Kirk Gaither, will be featured on the new "CPR Vol. 2" compact disc. Set for an early June, nationwide release by the Threshing Floor Records and Righteous Sinner Records labels and co-produced by Christian bass guru Randy George, the CD will highlight the vision and playing chops of various Christian groups who specialize in playing progressive rock.

"We are excited about this, and working with Randy George is just a dream come true," Rebsamen said. "You have artists like (former Spock's Beard frontman) Neal Morse and Orphan Project on the disc, and people like Yes' Rick Wakeman, Glass Hammer and former Kansas guitarist-songwriter Kerry Livgren were featured on 'CPR Vol. 1.' It's just incredible."

Young Earth's spiritualized contribution to the new various artists compilation is the punchy original, "One True God"; Wallimann also contributes the solo song "Waiting for the Sun to Rise" on the "CPR" album.

"It is great to be involved in this project," said Wallimann, who recently moved from France to the United States before joining Young Earth. "It's been exciting for us, definitely."

After several online discussions professing their faith in religion and progressive rock to each other, Rebsamen managed to tap George's ferociously complex bass playing for "One True God" via e-mail files.

"Having him play on that was amazing," said Rebsamen of George, who plays bass in Neal Morse's solo band and guitar and bass in the Seattle-based Ajalon. "We had the basic tracks, and Randy just put something amazing under it. I told him to just go with it and play whatever. Then he made it up and went with it."

Rebsamen's bandmates continue to feel the aftershock of being selected for the "CPR" disc. Law and Wallimann failed to suppress their smiles during a band meeting Monday at their rehearsal recording space in Rebsamen's house, while Gaither discussed his influences with a youthful energy.

"Yeah, it's great to be a part of this CD, and hey, have you seen Dream Theater's drummer, Mike Portnoy?" Gaither asked like a wide-eyed child on a playground. "He has to be the greatest drummer alive."

Several minutes later, Wallimann, 27, played along to one of the band's rough mixes. His nimble fingers almost blurred as they sprinted across his guitar's dark fretboard. Then, suddenly, Wallimann stopped, glanced at the guitar body and laughed.

"Oh man; I'm going to have to re-learn that part again," he joked.

Complex musical passages, such as racing guitar and keyboard parts, equally mobile bass lines and tricky time signatures drive Young Earth. They love the work of early Yes, Pink Floyd, Rush, Genesis, Jeff Beck, Steve Vai, Radiohead and Kansas, as well the more recent output of Spock's Beard, Ajalon, Proto-Kaw and Dream Theater.

"It's nice to play something that challenges you as a musician," Rebsamen said of prog-rock's multi-layered compositions that stretch mainstream radio's short arrangements and running times. "There are themes and passages, and themes resurface in progressive rock."

"The 'CPR' title stands for Christian progressive rock, and it also stands for cardiopulmonary resuscitation," George added. "We think Christian music needs progressive rock to give listeners something different."

Producer Randy George

Despite the grand scope of their music — Young Earth will release their debut CD in December with bass parts from George and area bassists Anthony Sallee (Michael W. Smith) and Mark Clay (Newsong) — the quartet hasn't strayed from their affection of sharply defined hooks and melodies that round out less-complex rock and pop music. "Songs that sound like they were written in 20 minutes are all right and all, but progressive rock has been about epic storytelling," the 40-year-old Rebsamen said. "And what better way to tell a story than to do it based on the Bible and in faith?"

"And progressive rock doesn't sing about sex, drugs and topics like that," he added. "We leave that to the bad boys of music."

George agreed, stating that playing difficult or near-impossible lines or patterns both in practice and performance helps a musician grow and find more avenues for creative expression.

"What we're doing is we have the 'CPR' bands' links on the Web site www.cprock.com, and people can go in there and buy the CDs from the bands they chose on the bands' web sites," he said during a telephone interview Tuesday. "One person over in Europe said he linked on to the site, bought 'Vol. 1' and then bought all of the CDs of some of the bands. That helps the bands."



PHOTOS BY KAIA LARSEN • TIMES RECORD
(Above) Young Earth guitarist David Wallimann solos during a playback of the band's songs Monday.

Despite the naysaying of punk bands, guitar solo-shy pop groups and cold-shouldered critics, progressive Christian rock is spreading throughout the country, thanks to "believers" like Morse and Livgren, George said.

"A lot of people who grew up with progressive music in the 1970s are now in their 40s, and being Christians, they might not realize that there's Christian progressive rock out there," he said. "It's good to hear lyrics that speak to your heart, and to have music with that level of musicianship."

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For information, visit

www.youngearth.net.



Young Earth band members include, from left, drummer Kirk Gaither, singer Chuck Law, Wallimann and keyboardist Bill Rebsamen. The Fort Smith-based Christian progressive rock band will be featured on the "CPR Vol. 2" compilation, to be released nationwide in June.