



About the Orchestra

For the past four years, The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra has actively redefined both the local music and film cultures of St. Louis. In addition to its prolific composition and live performance of new film scores for films of the Silent Era, the ensemble—equal parts indie/punk-stalwart and academically trained composers/musicians—has provided the soundtracks for many of St. Louis' most vital and acclaimed locally-produced contemporary films.

Silent Era Film Score Composition and Performance

R&P MPO believes the films of the Silent Era are not dusty museum pieces, but vital and urgently relevant works of art. The ensemble consciously eschews the styles that dominated early film accompaniment—often the popular tunes of the time—in observance of the century of popular music that has since shaped the contemporary ear. Consisting of a string section, a brass section, piano, and percussion, and informed by classical and contemporary sources alike, the R&P MPO's forays into noise, folk, and psychedelia are tempered by a melodic sensibility rooted firmly in the Romantics. In other words, the R&P MPO is a contemporary motion picture orchestra serving a contemporary audience.

Contemporary Film Soundtrack Scoring

In scoring contemporary films, The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra employs the same ethic they apply to Silent Era classics: everything in service of the film and the audience. The R&P MPO's soundtrack composition and recording work seeks to support and enhance contemporary filmmakers' visions without overwhelming them. The producers and directors of St. Louis' most vital and acclaimed documentaries have sought out R&P MPO, and the ensemble has enthusiastically obliged. Telling the stories of our community not only enriches our understanding of one another, but spotlights and furthers the work of St. Louis filmmakers as they reach out to new audiences within and beyond the region.

Speaking of St. Louis...

R&P MPO believes that St. Louis, like Silent Era film, is singularly strange and beautiful. The stories of St. Louis—again, like Silent Era film—are invaluable not only for a greater understanding of ourselves, but hold meaning for new audiences. While continuing to enrich, entertain, and inspire St. Louis audiences, the group is geared to be St. Louis' cultural ambassadors outside the region.

It's all about furthering the mission.



Best Of the Year

Best St. Louis Shows of 2011: Part One

By Kiernan Maletsky Mon., Dec. 26 2011 at 10:46 AM

Categories: **Best Of the Year**

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Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra present *Go West* at El Leñador, September 26, 2011

The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra is consistently among the most interesting and talented groups in St. Louis. This tiny orchestra (comprised of former members of the Baysayboos, Whole Sick Crew, etc.) takes old silent films and writes a score to accompany them. They the group plays the score live as audiences watch the film.



Aside from providing quality entertainment, the Orchestra also forces an education on younger film fans. The mostly-forgotten silent films of yesteryear are now vital and alive in the minds of anyone who has seen a Rats & People show. The group has done *Go West*, *Die Bergkatze*, *Nosferatu*, *Strike* and others. As accidental historians and educators, it has brought a bit of classic cinema to all of us fans, and we are thankful. Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra performances are beautiful and get a huge positive response from audiences. (Each show I've seen has ended with a standing ovation.)

But the group does have problem: too much talent and not enough money. It's a common complaint here in town, but in this case it seems especially unfair. The members of R&P MPO are hard-working, ambitious and sweet. They take each task very seriously and wish to do the best job possible. They are diligent to the point of obsession when studying, scoring, editing, practicing and playing a new project. It is their attention to detail and love of their work that makes their performances so special for audiences. They work to the point of exhaustion, and it shows.

The group was very interested in touring (especially after being so well-received among the film community in neighboring Columbia, MO), but the tour van needed work. In order to raise money to go on tour, Rats & People set up a residency at El Leñador (an El Leñadency, as it's called) and performed a different piece every week, usually presenting one full film with a short or two included.

The last week of the El Leñadency was to feature *Go West*, but the performance was protested by the copyright holders of the Buster Keaton classic. They wanted \$250 for the screening of the film. Already having promised free shows and *Go West*, in particular, the Orchestra decided that they wouldn't back out on its fans. The group would, however, accept donations to pay for the *Go West* screening so that they wouldn't have to borrow from the van fund just to have the show.

The band [set up a website](#) to take donations on a Sunday night, and they had all the money they needed before noon the next day. Donations were made not only by locals, but by fans and friends out of state -- ones that wouldn't even be able to see the performance -- just because they wanted to contribute. Upon reaching their goal, the band took down the donation link and sent out a polite update which read: "We're gonna *Go West* on the 26th! Thank you so much. We're... speechless, humbled, so very grateful for your help and support." And because they are so damn classy, they even mailed hand-written thank you notes to each of the donors.

But the night of the performance wasn't all smiles and victory at first. The news was bleak that day: St. Louis visionary and rogue developer Bob Cassilly had been found dead that morning at the construction site of his newest project, Cementland. The mood out on the crowded sidewalk pre-show was gloomy. This particular audience seemed to be comprised of tons of young artists -- many living in the neighborhood on Cherokee Street -- and everybody seemed to be just a little upset. There were whispers, rumors, a few tears.

We were all kind of lost that night until the R&P brought us back together -- both as an audience and as humans. The visuals co-mingling with the beautiful strings is, at times, too much for a wee heart to take. *Go West* can produce quite a swing of emotions in the viewer, and it's interesting to go from crying to laughing in the span of just a few minutes.

Sitting there watching *Go West* that night (for the 5th time, I believe), I had one repeating thought: *It's silly that we're watching this at El Leñador*. This should be in a museum. This should be at the Sheldon. This should be at the Fox. I mean, I'm glad that we get to watch it there for free, sipping on cheap drinks at our favorite place, but R&P deserve the grandest of stages. And it deserves more money.

Its members did raise enough money that night to get their van fixed and they went on to play Milwaukee, Madison, Chicago and Farmington, before coming home to begin work on yet another project. Thankfully, Cassilly's fearless, inventive spirit lives on.

Oh Shit Moment: When Friendless straps deer antlers on Brown Eyes so that she can defend herself against the Bull. (If that reads like code, you're missing out.) Audiences always gasp. That scene gets us every time, we're not sure if we're going to laugh or cry and we end up doing both. 'Bittersweet' is a hell of an emotion.

Highlight of the Night: Watching all of the smiling, tear-stained faces after the show. Everyone was just a little lighter and more loving as they left the venue. People who had been closed off and numb earlier were hugging and kissing after the performance. Everyone seemed to have that sort-of magical post *It's a Wonderful Life* glow.



--Jamie Lees

[Building International Coalitions Through Beer and Pavement](#)

The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra

Posted in [Film](#), [Live](#) by Zac on June 26, 2011

This is a review I did for The Collective. Sorry for posting two of these in a row, but I just haven't had the time for unique content. There's a post coming regarding the best albums so far (not as long a list as you'd suspect, not really a list). I'll probably do something on a brewery as well as those get the most traffic.



In the age of THX and 3D film, it's hard to believe anyone would want to see a silent film made in 1925 Soviet Union, much less play music for said film. However, that's exactly what The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra of St. Louis did Thursday night. On the screen was Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike*, the story of a pre-revolutionary strike and violent suppression.

For the time period and lack of soundtrack or dialogue, *Strike* is a rather...well...striking film with fine performances, an impressive amount of action, and some interesting use of file footage of factories and slaughtered cattle. Silent film is often known for the appearance of over-acting. Not only did actors have to make up for the lack of audio dialogue, but the

unusually fast pace of the film often gave the impression of hyperactivity. That said, the cast in *Strike* were incredibly engaging and convincing in their roles. Several scenes were rather exciting and included some intense physical acting not seen in today's film as stunt men and CGI tend to suck the life from today's films. Eisenstein expertly mixed in footage of factories and slaughtered cattle to demonstrate both the hard working conditions of the early industrial age as well as the savagery of union busting in Russia prior to Soviet takeover. All in all, *Strike* is a film well-deserving of revisiting even 85 years later, especially in light of all the labor disputes of our own time.

Considering all of that, *Strike* still would have been severely lacking in context and drama had The Rats & People not played the soundtrack. Where dialogue was missing or could not be adequately translated in subtitles, the orchestra filled this void with an expertly composed and emotionally performed piece that rivals the best soundtracks of today. In fact, where a soundtrack for a modern film only has to suggest pace and urgency, performing an original piece for a silent film has to do so much more. The composer's challenge is to write music that tells the story where the images leave us wanting more. The musicians' purpose is to convey emotion and exigency only through the squeals of their strings, thunder of percussion, and the bass' groove. The Rats & People do all of this extremely well.

Although the film is unavoidably dated, the themes and drama are pertinent to our times and the orchestra's performance went a long way in making that apparent. Although much of the instrumentation comes off as classical, a close listen reveals something more post-rock like Louisville's Rachel's. Like Rachel's, The Rats & People apply a punk sensibility to chamber music, understanding the impact images have on the live performance and work within that environment to make some pretty amazing art. All this was achieved in about 80 minutes Thursday in the big theater at Ragtag.

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In a Silent Way: The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra scores the silent film *Nosferatu* this weekend at Off Broadway

By **Christian Schaeffer** Wednesday, Nov 25 2009

Comments (1)

Fans of inventive, literate rock & roll shed a little tear when Rats and People called it quits last year. By combining British folk- and indie-rock traditions, the band cut a path between the Dead Milkmen and the Decemberists and left the excellent album *The City of Passersby* in its wake. But not long after the split, the core of the original band reconstituted itself as the Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra. The instrumental ensemble writes and performs scores to silent movies of yore by mixing traditional orchestral tools (violin, trumpet and trombone) with modern instrumentation (electric guitar, theremin and Wurlitzer electric piano). The result is an often haunting and always engaging soundtrack that provides a concurrent dialogue to the film's visual storytelling.

To date, the band has scored such silent classics as Buster Keaton's *Go West*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* and, most recently, F.W. Murnau's take on the Dracula legend, *Nosferatu*. The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra recently traveled to Vanderbilt University in Nashville to play along with *Nosferatu* on Halloween night, and the band will reprise its film score at a screening at Off Broadway this week. B-Sides sat down with the band to discuss the difference



The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra: "We don't exist. We're inhabiting the film; we're telling people how to feel about the film."

what we think about the movie after watching it 40,000 times and then writing a critical essay about the film and expressing it emotionally through music and then performing it in such a way where nobody knows we exist.

How did the instrumentation come about for Nosferatu? Theremins and electric pianos aren't normally employed for silent-film scores.

Matt Pace (piano, trumpet): We decided we would use the strings until you finally saw *Nosferatu* [Count Orlok], and then when he comes in we would use all the instruments with a kind of "wah-wah-wah" sound. So we saved all the weird, vibrate-y electronic noises — sounds that come from the ether — because *Nosferatu* keeps being described as like a wisp.

BS: And he acts as a shadow, like he's barely there at all.

MP: Also, it's what we had. [*Laughs*]

between rock & roll and orchestral scores, and how best to soundtrack a vampire.

B-Sides: *How was the performance of Nosferatu in Nashville?*

Brien Seyle (violin, guitar): It was a really engaged audience. When we play these things, the question is, "Who is watching the film?" And these were people with questions about the film. It was people who actually had an experience watching this movie, and that is fucking rad. That's something that we don't always get, though [it happens] more and more.

How does the Motion Picture Orchestra compare to playing in rock bands? This seems like a totally different payoff from playing onstage.

Robert Laptad (drums): After we did *Go West* and that was received really well, I completely lost the fire to play rock music anymore. I hadn't played rock music that was received that well ever, and we had just done this one thing, and we were getting standing ovations, and over 100 people [were] there. After that, I could never get myself back into playing rock.

BS: We've all been in rock bands and played in lots of rock bands — we played in rock bands for a decade. And guess what? It's always the same — it's always rad — but it's always us getting drunk and playing music. And then we started this thing that didn't have lyrics, didn't have vocals and is just trying to express something that another narrative artist created 80 years ago. It is so much more gratifying to play [this] music. It's just the same as playing rock music: Instead of lyrics, we have a visual story. It's still narrative, and our lyrics were largely narrative all the time. So it's using music to support a narrative.

Matt Frederick (trombone): It seems like the locus has shifted from thinking about how you are projecting yourself to an audience. With a movie-score work, you are thinking much more about the experience of an audience member.

BS: We don't exist. We're inhabiting the film; we're telling people how to feel about the film. We have to have a critical stance on the film, but during the experience of watching the film, we don't exist at all. We're smoke in the chandelier. We're just inhabiting what people are experiencing visually. It's important; it's subtle. It's not about us as humans; it's not about our faces. It's about

Details

The Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra
8 p.m. Saturday, November 28.
Off Broadway, 3509 Lemp Avenue.
\$8, 314-773-3363.

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Mini-orchestra will perform original silent film music at Ragtag Cinema

Monday, September 21, 2009 | 12:01 a.m. CDT; updated 5:53 p.m. CDT, Monday, September 21, 2009

BY [Katie Davis](#)

COLUMBIA — The music group [Rats & People Motion Picture Orchestra](#) will perform an original accompaniment to Buster Keaton's "Go West" at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Ragtag Cinema.

Matthew Freundlich, associate programmer for the Ragtag Cinema, discovered Rats & People two years ago when the group first performed "Go West" for a film series at Webster University in St. Louis.

"It was striking that they were able to mix up various genres, orchestrate complex arrangements and also tap into the emotion of the film," Freundlich said. "It was also rare that musicians under the age of 40 were performing and composing silent film accompaniment. I was very excited."

By writing mixed-genre scores with instruments as varied as the violin and tape loops, Rats & People pairs its own contemporary style with these classic films.

Freundlich contacted Rats & People and arranged to have them perform their music for "The Last Laugh" for the Ragtag's German expressionist series last October. His goal is to present these silent films to audiences as what they truly are — movies.

The group has participated in competitions, namely participating in the Webster University's film series in St. Louis. Matt Pace, a member of the band, explained that at a screening for the documentary "Silver Spurs," some of the group's current members met Mike Steinberg, program director for the series.

"We usually watch a film a bunch of times before we actually start thinking about what we're going to do with it," said Pace, who plays piano, guitar and trumpet. "Then, we pick up on all of the themes by thinking of them as acts of the movie. The emotions are always more important to us than the action."

Freundlich believes that new musical accompaniment, like that of Rats & People, can help bring out important details of these films.

"Context is important. The original music included tinkling piano scores. That was written for a 1925 audience and was appropriate for them," Freundlich said. "But Rats & People's music complements the film. It gives a sense of the melancholy, loneliness and attitude in a different but much more interesting way."

Rats & People has composed musical accompaniments for other silent films since "Go West," including the German expressionist film, "The Last Laugh" and the Russian government-commissioned "Strike."

Keaton wrote "Go West" in 1925 as a comedy about a hapless city slicker who falls off a train near a ranch and tries his luck

as a cowboy. It was the first silent film the St. Louis-based group used to develop its musical style.

“I think the term ‘silent film’ already marginalizes these movies. While the definition is accurate, it already has some type of stigma working against it,” Freundlich said. “Yes, Buster Keaton was a great silent filmmaker. But first and foremost, he was a great filmmaker.”





