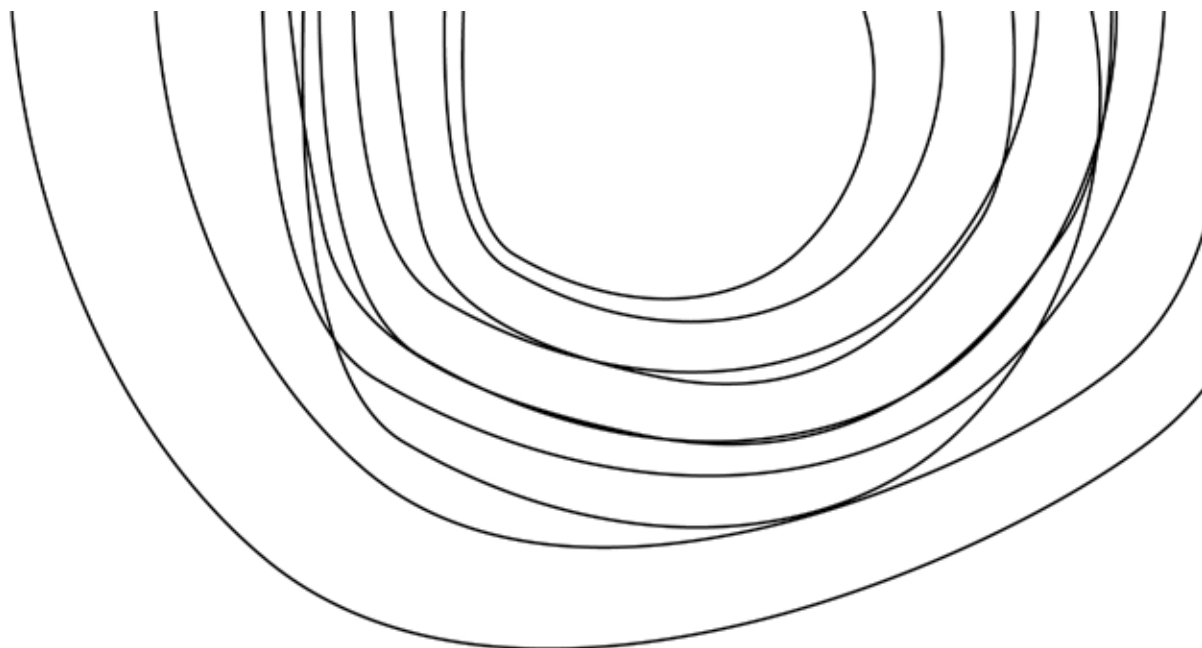


by ellen eldridge  
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# ROMEO SPIKE

A Band of Bound-Together Dreamers





**IMAGINE TAKING A TRIP THROUGH SPACE but not necessarily through time - a ride where the course doesn't exactly follow a specific path. Flashing lights surround you with a sense of panicked fury, but relax the mind rather than awaken fear. Great music evokes places that lack concrete and hints at surfaces without allowing the listener to find a foothold. This is the music that inspires us to draw, paint, think and ultimately dream.**

A perfect storm of talent, rock and blissful experimentation exists in Romeo Spike's founding members, Donn Aaron and Mike Kunz, who built the band around this esoteric idea, while creating something new and insightful. To Kunz, "Songwriting is this weird form of magic where if you happen to be in the right headspace, you just have to play one note and listen for all the music that is already there."

Where exactly does the band's name come from? It's actually a literary reference dating back to the decorative "Romeo spikes" that were used to keep young "Romeos" from climbing up to meet their "Juliets" on the balconies of 19th Century New Orleans estates.

Romeo Spike's latest album, *For The Cause*, is a foray into the minds of songwriters with curious ideas and abundant talent. The fact that these souls were geographically separated during its production, yet still able to create music that connected on an incredibly personal level, speaks volumes about their talent.

Kunz and Aaron formed Romeo Spike after engaging in a weekly

songwriting challenge organized to push and inspire them. The band drew some of its inspiration for the challenge from the Lennon/McCartney idea of coming into the studio with a song to try to outdo each other. Kunz said, "For fun, we started to challenge one another to write better songs. Every Saturday we were supposed to submit one song each, but by the second week we had about ten songs. It just kind of exploded from there. We both realized we really like where the other's heads were at with songwriting and we'd spend hours talking about the songs, so we decided to make an album." Songs from these sessions that would later end up on *For The Cause* include "Lipstick Leslie" and "It's Only Real."

Donn Aaron's previous work in the music industry has paired him with artists including Ludacris, for whom he recorded guitar on a track featured in the movie *National Security*. His indie solo album *Unfinished Symphonies* was chosen as one of the top 12 DIY picks of 2005 by *Performing Songwriter Magazine*. Aaron has also been doing mastering work as a digital editor for Glenn Schick Mastering in Atlanta. Donn says, "Editing is very involved and is both creative and emotionally driven. We work with both the artist and label A&R, fighting for the artist to get what they are trying to achieve onto their albums." Because of Aaron's passion and love for his work, Romeo Spike caught the attention of Grammy Award-winner and long-time Elton John producer, Matt Still. Aaron says, "About six months after he came in to do production work for Elton John, I sent him a letter and a CD and we ended up having lunch. He produced half of our CD and sang backup on some of the songs."

When asked exactly how Aaron managed to do this, Kunz said, "Donn's likely to get a response when he sends someone an email because he's such a genuine guy. One thing to know about Donn, he's one of the most intense human beings on the planet. He's motivated by classic rock and is a massive Elton John fan. He was excited to talk to Matt Still about recording and working on classic Elton tracks, remixing and all that."

Kunz's musical experimentation began by transitioning from jazz to rock, and led to a sound rich in electronic moods as well as moving rock. "The best stuff comes without much thought - like magic. 'Cocaine Skinny' was the last song done and it came together in about three hours. Donn came up with the acoustic guitar part, added dulcimer and pedal steel guitar, and we worked in some melodies and the presence of the tune. Lyrically, it probably came out of an obsession with watching movies like *Blow* and out of an intense attraction to ideas revolving around Pablo Escobar and the kinds of people who diet by



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cocaine. It was a creative attempt to create a character within a song,” said Kunz.

At the time of the recordings, Mike lived in Chicago and Donn lived in Atlanta. Their physical separation plays out in themes ranging from space-men, stars, lasers and ghosts all the way to lesbians, cocaine and reality. Though the surface themes may seem disconnected and unrestrained, the songs are musically tight with well-crafted guitar solos and purposeful drums. Songs like “Candy Heart” contain motivational solos that recall Jerry Garcia channeling a higher power or soliciting some energy from the universe. “Seasick” elicits feelings of déjà vu, really getting inside the listener’s head. Once both musicians were together in Atlanta, they added drummer Will Brown (former F’n Heartbreaks) and solidified their lineup with bassist Skyler Ross in the spring of 2009.

In just over a year, Romeo Spike has supported its cause by playing numerous shows, including a headlining slot at the Strange Daze Music and Arts Festival this past August, performing alongside Atlanta favorites Stokeswood, Before The Solstice, Jungol, Hip To Death and Mice In Cars. “We are friends with area bands who became early headliners and, when I saw the festival website, I came forward and said we’d love to be part of this and I asked what we needed to do. The main promoter, Nadia Lelutiu, said she liked our sound

and we ended up on the bill as well,” said Brown.

By the end of 2010, the guys plan to release an EP, which is being tracked live in the same studio where Kansas’ “Carry On Wayward Son” was recorded. This spring, Propellerhead aided in the production of the forthcoming EP by providing new recording software to the band. Will Brown feels excited by changing the structure of songs and the difference it makes playing live versus the recorded product. “We’re finishing up the EP and the songs take on a new shape live because of the nature of the instrumentation.” Romeo Spike’s stage show is much more energetic, up-tempo and includes a varied bass line on “Cocaine Skinny” along with a more stripped-down sound.

Beyond the challenges used to keep inspiration running strong, these guys take themselves and their music seriously. Skyler Ross said, “I’m a musician and I work at it constantly, always thinking of ideas and songs to bring to the table for the band. In the rehearsal space, I’ll practice three or four hours a night because, in my eyes, it’s incredibly important to be the best musician you can be. All the guys in this band take the musicality very seriously.”

Brown concludes, “There’s a spontaneous energy to our craft and song-writing that allows our personalities to shine through.”

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