

Masters of illusion

Noise, movement, extra musicians? Here's how rock duos appear larger onstage

By Christopher Borrelli

TRIBUNE REPORTER

Be honest: No matter how cool that incredibly hip two-piece band you're digging may seem, when presented with that same two-piece band in concert, be it the White Stripes or Death From Above 1979, Lightning Bolt or Japandroids, doesn't some small corner of your brain think ... "lounge act"? Doesn't a piece of you subconsciously imagine yourself to be in a very progressive Ramada Inn?

The history of pop music is clear on this: Acts larger than 10 members are orchestras. Acts smaller than three are duos, requiring additional musicians to compensate, rounding out either their sound or stage presence.

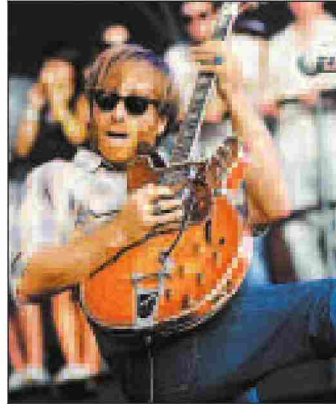
Yet, in the past decade — particularly since the success of the White Stripes, coupled with audiences' growing acceptance of tape loops and drum machines as quasi band members — the two-piece that risks appearing a little thin and performs as a two-piece onstage has become a ubiquitous reality.

Not every two-piece you would expect to remain as two pieces goes it alone live, of course. Beach House, a dreamy, mellow, keyboard-guitar indie duo from Baltimore, added a drummer at the Pitchfork Music Festival last month, avoiding the inevitable "Captain & Tennille on 'ludes" commentary.

Still, there are those brave pairs who try to conjure the illusion that an audience is watching a larger group. Also at Pitchfork: Sleigh Bells, a singer and a guitarist from Brooklyn, N.Y., augmented themselves convincingly with only a drum machine and the energy of a pre-1969 Mick Jagger. Lightning Bolt, a screeching, crashing bass-and-drum noise duo from Providence, R.I., avoided any hint of incompleteness by using an array of guitar pedals and the, uh, sounds that drummer Brian Chippendale made using a small microphone he conceals in a mask he wears onstage.

Here's how four other pairs seem larger than two.

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TIM HARRISON/REDEYE PHOTO

The Black Keys

Appeared locally: Lollapalooza, Aug. 6

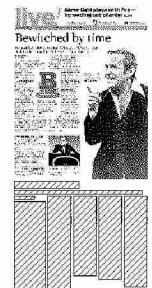
From: Akron, Ohio

Genre: Dirty blues rock

Instruments represented: Guitar, drums

Augmented ... how?

Occasionally guitarist Dan Auerbach, above, and drummer Patrick Carney seem to be playing a vast distance apart, which does fill more of the stage — though the more popular the group has become, the larger the stages have become and the wider that gulf can seem. Another method: adding musicians, as they did at Lollapalooza: "We bring on a keyboardist and bassist for part of it now because we couldn't play the new record without them," Carney said. But usually, he added, they set up as close to each other as they can and play as loudly as possible. "This was something we worried about when we started playing big stages, and (the size) feels less intimidating if we can play closely."





ELIZABETH MYERS/REDEYE PHOTO

Matt and Kim

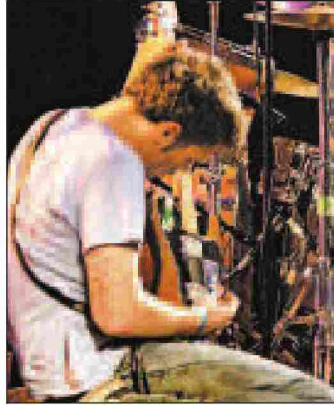
Appeared locally: Lollapalooza, Aug. 6

From: Brooklyn, N.Y.

Genre: Sunny indie pop

Instruments represented: Keyboards, drums

Augmented ... how? Matt Johnson (on keyboards) and Kim Schifino (on drums) are often turned inward toward each other, slightly, composing a little island of sorts onstage that helps their warm, friendly sound seem that much more intimate (and draws the eye away from empty swaths of stage). Also, said Johnson: "Kim hits the drums bigger and harder than drummers twice her size. And I have two hands and 10 fingers, so for songs like 'Daylight' I'll split the keyboard into like five instruments."



Local H

Next local show: Aug. 21, Otto's in Dekalb

From: Zion, Ill.

Genre: Archetypal alt-rock

Instruments represented: Guitar, drums

Augmented ... how? With a famously raucous, roof-raising live show that recognizes little separation between stage and audience. Also, massive, gut-quaking power chords rarely hurt to suggest a larger, more rounded act than the one standing (or leaping) before you. "I just turn everything up super (bleeping) loud," said singer-guitarist Scott Lucas, above. "I also think a great drummer is key. People need something to look at, and me alone just wouldn't cut it. Brian (St. Clair) is like Animal up there onstage, and everybody loves the Muppets."



No Age

Next local show: Sept. 13, Pritzker Pavilion (opening for Pavement)

From: Los Angeles

Genre: Noise, abrasive punk pop

Instruments represented: Guitar, drums

Augmented ... how? Guitarist Randy Randall, above left: "The best part about being a two-piece band is that when you go out you always have a dance partner." Which is not a bad way of describing his two-step with drummer Dean Spunt. Their rushed delivery leaves little room to consider what isn't there. What is: Spunt's breathless, shouted vocals, a frantic crunch of chords, a generous screech of feedback, a love for near-constant cymbal smashing — which becomes a ringing wall of dissonance. Asked to name his own favorite two-piece, Randall replied: "Leopold and Loeb."