

Foxygen



FOXYGEN
AND
STAR
POWER



FOXYGEN is the dynamic rock 'n' roll duo of SAM FRANCE and JONATHAN RADO. Formed in 2005 when both were high-schoolers, the band has reached incredible heights and turbulent lows, rebirthing and reinventing themselves with every next album. Foxygen has never lacked ambition.

With Sam on vocals and Rado on production, the duo self-produced and self-released several chaotic EPs and LPs throughout their first few years, finally catching mainstream attention with their record *Take the Kids Off Broadway* in 2011, which was critically acclaimed and launched their career as (in)famous modern day rock stars.

Foxygen has never lacked ambition. Jumping from genre to genre between albums, songs and even within songs, they have never been *boring*. While Rado has always been the calmer, more measured of the two, Sam France – taking from rock legends of the past – has adopted a wild persona: recklessness, chaotic stage antics, and provocative stunts are all staples of his rock star character, to the point where it can be hard to tell when he's acting and when he's being real.

"Everything I do is performative. I'm not genuine. I don't feel real feelings. I'm a robot, a robot of rock." (DIY Mag 2019)

"I thought Sam was cool because he wore a Ramones t-shirt and I was pretending to be into punk rock at the time," Rado remembers.

Foxygen's reverence for the classics has led to them often being labelled a 'retro band' – but it wasn't always that way. *"The music we were making when we were 16 was the most un-retro thing you've heard in your life. There was nothing '60s about it - it was like rap music, just ridiculous,"* Rado told Loud and Quiet magazine in 2013. *"We've moved into [retro music] and it's what we're into now, and it'll change again."*

Having traversed rock and pop history; travelling the 60s, 70s through the 90s; borrowing licks from the Stones, choruses from Elvis and Todd Rundgren vocal styles from Bowie and Jagger – the retro comparisons aren't misplaced. But Foxygen are just putting their twist on the rock and roll tradition: take what's come before and reinvent it for the 21st century. After all, they *are* the self-proclaimed *21st Century Ambassadors of Peace and Magic...*

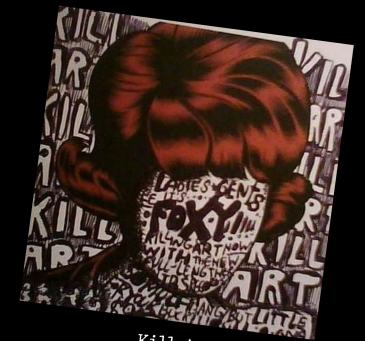
Some early Foxygen records include *Electric Sun Machine*, *Cat Food Dog Food Motor Oil*, *The Jurassic Explosion*, *Philippic*, *Ghettoplastikk* and *Kill Art*



Foxygen in 2010



Sam France and Jonathan Rado in 2007/8



Kill Art (2009)

take the kids off broadway

It's March 9th, 2011, and two 21-year-olds just put the finishing touches on their band's latest record. They burn a CD and run out to catch a show by their idol Richard Swift, the avant-garde indie-rock musician and producer. The goal: get the record into his hands.

Rado: We decided... we saw that he was going to be in town, in New York, and we decided that we were going to finish the record and give it to him cause he **HAD** to hear it.

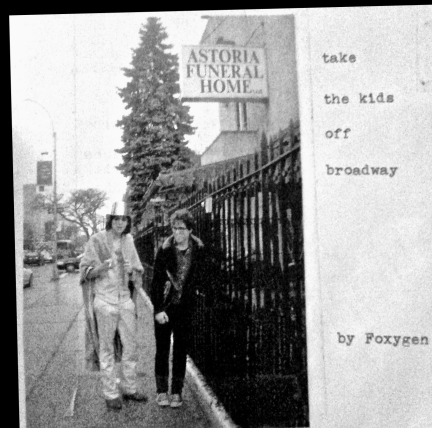
France: It was a deadline for us.

Rado: Yeah. It was an on-going record — we set that as the deadline — we'd set it as March ninth, I think it was, and gave it to Richard Swift on that date. And we literally finished it that morning. Sam put the final vocals on something that morning. We printed out a nice little cover, we taped it together, went down to the Mercury Lounge and we gave it to Richard Swift and he emailed us the next day saying "This is great, I've sent it to the label." And that was it — we gave it to one person.

Swift, now on board with Foxygen, joined the duo to help mix and master their LP and get it released on a major label. When it was finally released on Jagjaguwar in 2012, it instantly caught mainstream attention — critics and listeners loved it.

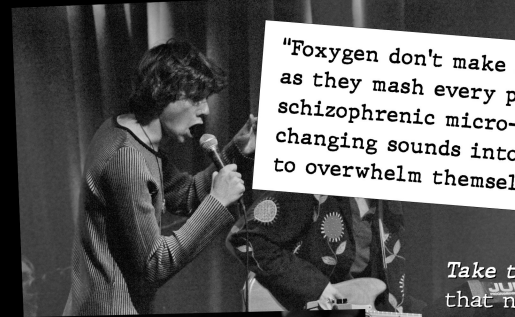
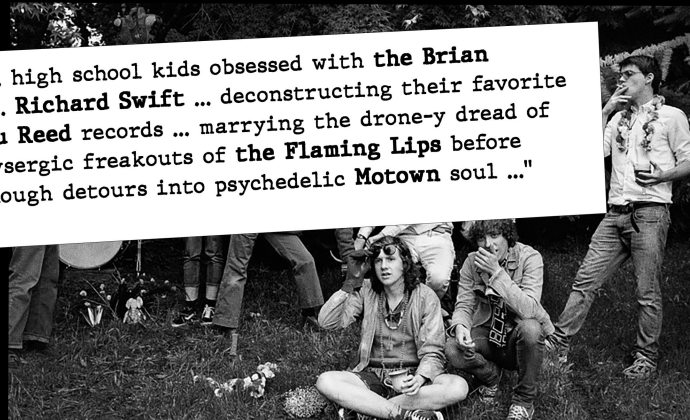


Album cover for the Jagjaguwar release

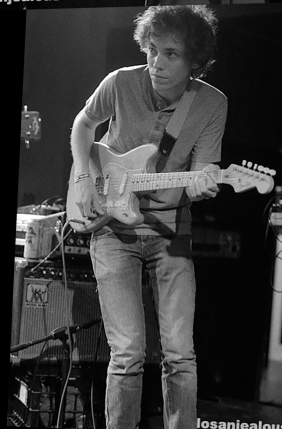


Original self-released cover

"... starting off as L.A. high school kids obsessed with the **Brian Jonestown Massacre** ... **Richard Swift** ... deconstructing their favorite **Stones, Bowie, and Lou Reed** records ... marrying the drone-y dread of the **Doors** with the lysergic freakouts of the **Flaming Lips** before heading recklessly though detours into psychedelic **Motown** soul ..." (pitchfork, 2012)



"Foxygen don't make songs in the traditional sense as much as they mash every possible sonic reference point into schizophrenic micro-albums, cramming so many constantly changing sounds into their compositions, the songs threaten to overwhelm themselves." (allmusic, 2012)



Take the Kids Off Broadway is an album that never seems to make up its mind. Hopping from genre to genre between verses and choruses, changing tempo and instrumentation throughout a song, Foxygen cram a double LP worth of ideas into just 7 tracks. The tracks are rife with references and allusions to the music of times long past, to the point where some reviews of the album just read like a list of influences. "I think it's cool that in this day and age we're being compared to old stuff — you don't see that," Sam France tells Aquarium Drunkard. "We're all about the old music."

The biggest hit off the record is *Make It Known*, which is coincidentally the song with the most classic song structure (verse, chorus, verse, chorus, etc). On the flipside, you have the sprawling 10-minute epic *Teenage Alien Blues*, which swaps out psychedelic glam rock for marching-band Broadway style singing for pulsing drums and heavy guitar hits—it feels like peak 2011 Foxygen. The album ends on the "piano" "ballad" *Middle School Dance (Song for Richard Swift)*, which sprawls into a fuzzy guitar bridge before settling on a spacy mellow outro.

Throughout all of this, Sam France's vocals fade in and out; sometimes loud and clear, sometimes drowned in reverb and echo, sometimes screamed in seemingly the opposite direction of the microphone. It's all very DIY — all the way down to their DIY recording techniques. Everything was recorded in their bedroom ("Foxy HQ") — Rado explains: "All that we had on *Broadway* was an echo pedal. The rest was straight into tape or straight into computer or whatever."

WE ARE THE 21ST CENTURY

Following the success of *Broadway* and their new friendship with Richard Swift, Foxygen were eager to jump back in the studio. Enlisting Swift as their producer, the duo adopted a more structured songwriting approach and ditched the home recording-sound for a polished 60s-70s-rock-influenced studio glaze.

"We used to record by just sitting in a room, play four chords, and be like, 'alright, that's good, that's a song' and hit record and that would be good, that would be a song. Recently, we've taken to demoing stuff, 'songwriting' like writing a song before you record it. I think with *Broadway*, Sam had a bunch of ideas and we just kinda smashed them all together."

The result is *We are the 21st Century Ambassadors of Peace and Magic*, a project that's at times pleasant, at times chaotic, at times focused, at times distracted - adorned with a beautiful red triangle and an all-seeing eye.

Despite all the gloss and fancy production, they haven't lost that Foxygen magic - and those Foxygen influences. Tracks are still filled with classic rock references left and right. *Blue Mountain* borrows its chorus from Elvis and a riff from the Stones; *Oh Yeah* almost quotes Jean Knight; *Oh No* rephrases Strawberry Fields Forever as a spacy, lonely pad. Reviewers compare the album to the Velvet Underground, Bob Dylan, David Bowie... But, as one reviewer puts it, "hunting for the various musical references - from Lou Reed to the Beatles to the Stones to David Bowie to Iggy Pop to the Doors - is basically missing the point."



"We Are the 21st Century Ambassadors of Peace and Magic, is supposed to bring world peace. That's the goal, in some abstract way."

This was also Foxygen's first real, proper tour. Wanting to mimic the stage antics of the rock legends of the past, but lacking any real experience, the shows became known for their rowdy energy and Sam France's often manic performances, culminating in them having to postpone several shows after France falls off a monitor and fracturing his leg.

Behind the scenes, stress was also building up. Sam's new girlfriend and fresh Foxygen backing singer Elizabeth le Fey became a center of conflict within the band, taking to Tumblr to spill the beans on the internal struggles of the band, painting Rado a tyrant trying to take control away from Sam. Rado and France deny this. France breaks up with le Fey and shortly after gets a restraining order against her, alleging abuse - which she counter-alleges (with no success in the courts and dubious evidence on her part, but that's besides the point). Despite only lasting a few months, this turbulent relationship will continue to hang like a dark cloud over Foxygen's future activities and works.

Backstage tensions and the pressures of the road eventually bubble up during their gig at SXSW 2013, with France interrupting *In The Darkness* to reply to a heckler: "Come on stage and talk to me about it, you fucking coward. Come on, get on the fucking stage!" After a brief storm off-stage, France returns to finish the set - but the picture of a tense, inexperienced and immature band has already been painted, and they'll have to spend years to overcome this stigma.

Despite all the chaos, *We Are the 21st Century...* is a huge success among both critics and audiences. The two singles San Francisco and Shuggie both blow up, making their way into every indie-rock-psychedelia-coffee-shop playlist and into the hearts of indie-pop listeners everywhere. France ends the era with a quote to *Believer Magazine*: "I am a little bit over the sixties stuff. I love it, but we're definitely going to make way different, darker music from now on."



SXSW 2013: Foxygen freaks out on stage, shows the pressure on bands at the festival

Sam France vocalized the stress, and told the audience how much of a toll the week was taking on him, and someone in the crowd told him to stop complaining.

"Come on stage and talk to me about it, you fucking coward. Come on, get on the fucking stage," France yelled back.



AMBASSADORS OF PEACE & MAGIC



STAR POWER



Foxygen have never been a band of stability. Barely a year after finishing *21st Century*, Foxygen ditches the studio gloss and professional production to begin work on their third, most ambitious album yet at their home studios. The premise involves the fictional alien band *Star Power* and their plot to take over the world: "*Star Power is a punk band that takes over the album and by the end of the album has taken over the band*," Sam France tells *Issue Magazine*. "*And it's also a radio station, a mysterious radio station run by aliens.*"

Twenty-four tracks long and clocking in at 1 hour and 21 minutes, *Foxygen...And Star Power* is a sprawling, noisy, glam-rock infested adventure. You could be forgiven for thinking some of the tracks are unfinished demos – the recording quality and lo-fi mixing certainly give off that sound – though that's intentional. It feels more punk that way.

Split up into four (or five) 'sides,' the record is intentionally pretty front-loaded. Starting off with *Side One, Part One: The Hits*, *How Can You Really* and *Coulda Been My Love* are straight 70s pop hits. This leads into *Side One, Part Two: Star Power Suite*: a hectic 4-track arc that takes us through the chaos of alien punk rock. *Side Two: The Paranoid Side* is where things get a little weird, with tracks like *Mattress Warehouse* sprawling out for 4 long minutes and *666* being fun, but very rough. *Side Three: Scream: Journey Through Hell* really picks up that punky sound with tracks like *Brooklyn Police Station* and *Talk*. The record is nicely wrapped up with the two closing tracks on *Side Four: Hang on to Love* – a sweet, ballad-y ending to a long journey to hell and back again.

Critics were split on *...And Star Power*. Some saw the intentional chaos as a boon, while others saw a band that had gotten too full of itself and a confused, unfinished, bloated record. Once again Foxygen draws comparisons, now to artists like Todd Rundgren and Lou Reed. The record also did little to shake the impression of a troubled and immature act they had picked up during *21st Century*.

Following so close after the release of their last record, the tours practically combined, and Foxygen coasted the success of *21st Century* to take their newer, weirder album to places it otherwise might not have made it: a gig on KEXP, playing *How Can You Really* on Letterman, and eventually a set at Pitchfork Music Festival Paris. Having had some time to work out their act, they were now less likely to end their shows in disaster – though they still kept the chaos and rowdiness (Sam France did not have the stamina to perform like he did).

Ultimately though, *...And Star Power* wasn't deemed a success. The last few shows they played were sold as a vague 'farewell tour,' later having to clarify that it was only a farewell to the fictional *Star Power*. Years later, France seemed to regret the record: "*I must have been on too many drugs, cause I thought Star Power was gonna be this huge record! It was insane, and we recorded it so lo-fi -- and a double album. In no dimension would that ever become like a mainstream record! What was I thinking?*" (Billboard, 2019)



"a cinematic, auditory adventure for the speedy freaks, skull krunchers, abductees, and misfits ... the radio station you can hear only if you believe."



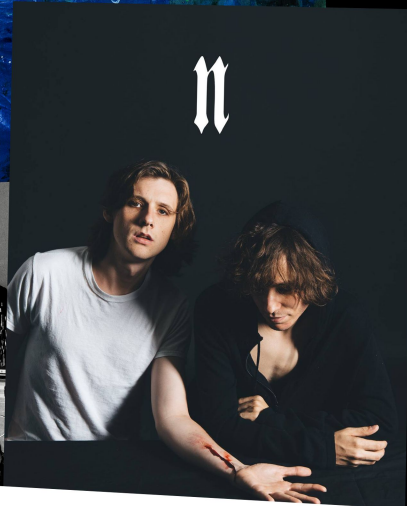
hang

"Sam France and Jonathan Rado enlist a full orchestra, go bananas" reads the iTunes blurb for *Hang*. And it's true — in many ways, *Hang* is Foxygen's most out-there record yet, though in others it's the most traditional. Ditching the DIY home recordings of *...And Star Power* for full 40-piece orchestrations and a vintage 70s sound (recorded and mixed straight to tape), *Hang* really leans into the sounds of musical theatre, of baroque and chamber pop, mixed with hints of Disney and '30s Hollywood musicals.

Hang is their most cohesive record yet, coming in at a tight 32 minutes with 8 songs. The funky *Follow the Leader* starts us off with a 70s baroque pop hit, leading straight into *Avalon*, an energetic showtune track with tempo changes, a chorus that brings to mind ABBA's *Waterloo*, and a raging saxophone solo to top it off. *America* jumps between genres and decades to tell us of the failure of the American Dream. *On Lankershim* takes on a country-ballad ride through Los Angeles, and *Upon a Hill* sees France do his best Bowie impression over big band instrumentation. Finally, *Rise Up* give us a faux-inspirational uplifting anthem about bettering yourself — so over-the-top that it comes across as ironic: "It's time to wake up early / Start taking care of your health / And start doing all the hard things / And believe in yourself"

Critical response was positive, and the record has become a fan favorite. The tour saw Foxygen bringing that same ambition on the road, touring with an expanded backing band and a full horn section. Live shows would consist of first playing a few of the hits, and then the entirety of *Hang* front-to-back — it was essentially musical theatre.

The album is intensely American — it was released on the day of Trump's inauguration. "There's a lot of fear. There's a lot of fear," Sam France tells Musicfeeds. "I don't know. It's hard to tell. Some people are really happy. And other people are really fuckin'... I don't know." The themes of the album — no matter how ironic or performative — are also steeped in the duo's feelings towards the country and its history. "I mean, I love America. And I love LA. And Rado does too. So much of the album, and so much of Foxygen, is Los Angeles. We've just soaked it into our blood: the city itself. And *Hang* is about Los Angeles."



And now you're on a train. Facing the wrong way so the trees are passing in front of you. And you're looking forward but everything is getting further away. These nowhere towns somehow sound good. Like the city is heavy, but out here we float a little bit. America is too big of a boat to sink. *Don't sink baby, Hang.*



Seeing Other People



Foxygen is growing up. They're no longer a couple 21-year-olds making wild rockstar hits, and it's showing. *Seeing Other People* is by far Foxygen's most mature album: still with that classic Foxygen sprawl and distractedness; but as the duo has grown up, so have the themes.

When Rado described it as a "breakup album, of sorts," fans naturally started worrying that Foxygen was breaking up. Sam France clarifies in their album release letter: "Is this the breakup album? Is the band breaking up? [...] No. We're never breaking up. We're not a band and never were."

Rather, the album is more about breaking up with their old ways of life. As France continues: "Goodbye to the drugs, to the partying. Goodbye to my twenties now, Goodbye to my Saint Laurent-model-body." This is their last album with Jagjaguwar too: it's the closing of one chapter of Foxygen, and (possibly) the beginning of the next. But as they repeat in all their album promo: Foxygen was "never just a band."

With *Seeing Other People*, Foxygen have moved into the 80s. "We wanted to capture the feel of great artists from the '60s and '70s, but, you know, the albums they made in say, 1986," France says. The front of the album is loaded with singles and hits, with France singing about his work with Rado on *Work*, and Mona giving us a groovy darkness. However, as promised, tracks like *Seeing Other People* and *Livin' a Lie* offer a more adult look into a rockstar's failing relationships, while *Face the Facts* is about coming to terms with everything you'll never be.

When we get to the last third of the album, the snappy singles are replaced with 5-minute tracks with sprawling outros. *News* brings in a gnarly bass riff, *Flag at Half-Mast* ends on a serene piano outro, and *The Conclusion* sees France wailing about how maybe, "we should just be friends." In a way this album finally sees Foxygen dropping the impenetrable irony of their past albums, even if just for a few moments, to offer a look into the band's souls.

Foxygen decided not to tour the record, citing the stress of the road and the impossibilities of bringing their ideas to fruition. "The way we want to tour has always been completely un-doable," according to Rado. The decision frustrated their label and management — but Foxygen had no reason to listen to them: *Seeing Other People* had been finished for over a year before it finally came out, reasonably frustrating the band. The cost of the band's ambition was another problem point: "In the end we come home and we've made zero money. So, on this, for this album, I think we were just a little sick of it."

That cynical look back permeates Foxygen's attitude during this era. "I don't know if I'm proud of everything I've done, I'm pretty embarrassed by a lot of it," France says. "It's a stupid band, right? Foxygen? It's not very well-respected." Frustrations with the industry, their past behavior, and the press have left them weary. As they conclude their album release letter, "Thank you, I'm Sorry and You're Welcome."



"It's a stupid band, right? Foxygen? It's not very well-respected. Cool record nerds, kids who like to smoke weed and listen to records from the '70s, they like it. And I like that, I like Foxygen and things like that. But I don't think we're very critically appreciated. I think we're seen as pretty goofy and not a very progressive group. I don't know... I don't know what people think of what I do..." - Sam France



Where are they now?

Jonathan Rado has been spending the past few years as one of indie music's most in-demand producers, producing for artists such as Father John Misty, The Killers, Weyes Blood and Crumb, among many others. He's recently put out a couple solo records of "sample-core" music, mostly produced on sample machines - he hasn't given up his affinity for analog, physical gear.

Sam France has been teasing a tell-all memoir for years titled *Sam Francisco: Confessions of an Indie Rock Star*, but no word yet on its release. Similarly, he has been teasing 2 studio albums, claiming both to be finished, and that he's just sitting on them until legal stuff is cleared. As of October 2021, he has been teasing "*Sam France's Famous Vampires E.P.* coming soon!"

FOXYGEN