

MUSIC



Year of the Buffalo

Ten months and one Sub Pop deal later, a teenage band learns to handle the hype. BY PAIGE RICHMOND

It took one phone call, during his senior year of high school, to change Avigdor Zahner-Isenberg's life. He stopped paying attention in class. His grades slipped; applying to UC Santa Cruz was no longer an option. Suddenly the songs about sexual frustration and apathy that he'd been casually recording with producer Aaron Embry carried weight. People were listening.

In December 2008, Tony Kiewel, head of A&R at Sub Pop, called to say he was interested in Avi Buffalo, the pop-tinged, guitar-driven band that Zahner-Isenberg had started a year before. Within a few months—as he attempted to graduate from high school in Long Beach, Calif.—Zahner-Isenberg was playing sold-out shows around Los Angeles, staying up until 1 a.m. on school nights. He started fielding offers from other labels, some of them majors; at 17, a record deal was dangled within his reach.

"That was when the tide changed," says Ashley Jex, Avi Buffalo's manager. "Everything was happening at warp speed."

The next 10 months were a blur for Zahner-Isenberg, his bandmates, and the people who helped him launch his career. By October, the band—none of whom were over 21; drummer Sheridan Riley was still in high school—had signed a deal with Sub Pop to release a full-length album. With the self-titled record

set for release on Tuesday, Avi Buffalo has become one of Sub Pop's most buzzed-about bands. In March they played SXSW. Pitchfork rated their 7-inch single "What's in It For?" a 7 out of 10, and earlier this month, Britain's *Guardian* called Avi Buffalo "one of 2010's most startlingly lovable albums." In just weeks, Avi Buffalo will play to a sold-out crowd at Sasquatch!, its biggest show yet.

Through all this, Zahner-Isenberg has remained about as calm as a 19-year-old indie darling could. Although he calls the Sub Pop deal "a dream kind-of-thing," he approaches his success with skepticism, and he seems unaware that his album—full of bright guitar solos and whip-smart turns of phrase in the lyrics, written when he was only 16—has all the makings to be this year's breakout hit.

Maybe that's because Zahner-Isenberg, the primary songwriter and musician behind Avi Buffalo, was never actively seeking a record deal. He had no intention of sending his self-produced demo to labels. Until Sub Pop came calling, his biggest career goal was to release an EP on a tiny, never-heard-of L.A. label owned by his manager. If not for Kiewel's offer, Zahner-Isenberg would be studying music theory at a community college, thinking about becoming a session guitar player, and playing shows around Long Beach and L.A. "I wanted to make music for a living," he said in a recent phone

call, "but I never really thought about it being through this."

Even the songs Zahner-Isenberg recorded at Embry's home studio, Hunter's Hollow, in 2008, were based more on a friendly, mentoring collaboration than on the pursuit of a deal. Embry—a studio pianist who has played on records by Elliott Smith and Jane's Addiction, among others—met Zahner-Isenberg in 2007, when their respective bands shared a bill. He remembers Avi Buffalo's performance that night as "mindblowing."

"I was standing around with a bunch of middle-aged friends that were in other bands, and they were sweating," he says. "These high-school juniors were one-upping everyone in the room."

At the time, Zahner-Isenberg was still perfecting his songs, and Embry, now 34, was just starting his studio. Recording together was an opportunity for both to hone their crafts. Neither believed the songs were poised for commercial success.

Sub Pop's Kiewel had other ideas. Embry, a longtime friend from Kiewel's years living in L.A., had recommended Avi Buffalo in passing, just "spreading the gospel," as Embry describes it. It took only a few listens to songs on the band's MySpace page—including "What's in It For?," which channels Built to Spill—for Kiewel to suggest a record deal. The recordings Embry and Zahner-Isenberg made just for fun would become nine of the 10 tracks on *Avi Buffalo*.

Any hesitations Kiewel had about the green band's age were offset by what he heard. Known for his solid judgment—he famously signed the Postal Service after hearing a one-song demo, resulting in one of the label's best-selling releases ever—Kiewel had no question about Zahner-Isenberg's songwriting skills.

"I think Avi writes great songs, consistently," Kiewel says. "Bands are made on the backs of one song, and you've got [to have] a few more behind it that are very good to make you more than a one-hit wonder."

During the waiting period between contact and contract, the buzz around Avi Buffalo grew. In May 2009 the band played the Echo, a popular L.A. venue, and the audience "seemed to be every old-school A&R guy in the music industry, lawyers, everybody," Jex says. That month, *Rolling Stone* called the still-unsigned band "simultaneously unsettling and sublime." Zahner-Isenberg was a month away from graduating from high school.

"It freaked me out, a lot. I got really mixed up and worried," he says. "In the middle of all this—we're just making a record and having fun—then all of a sudden, it's like, 'Record label!' Which is great, but what's going on?" Jex and Zahner-Isenberg say they took meetings with majors, still hoping the Sub Pop deal would come through. Finally, in September, Avi Buffalo performed in Seattle for the label's brass. Those live songs, particularly the seamless transition from bubbly plucked guitar chords to a two-minute Hendrix-style shred in "Remember Last Time," clinched the deal for Kiewel.

"My jaw was on the floor," says Kiewel. "One of my co-workers walked up to me and said, 'If we don't sign this band, I'm quitting.'"

After seeing the band only once, Kiewel offered Avi Buffalo a record deal. Six months later, they're touring nationwide with Japandroids, planning a summer tour with labelmates Blitzen Trapper, and tagging along with Modest Mouse for a couple of dates in July. But Zahner-Isenberg sometimes feels overwhelmed and unworthy. Despite all the attention his band has received in the past year, he has no illusions about himself. He thinks his music could be better, even recalling the show for the Sub Pop brass—with that jaw-dropping guitar solo—as "sloppy." He's wary of letting a record deal convince him that he's a success; on his next break from touring, he plans to take guitar lessons.

"Record labels are amazing—they can really help you out—but it has nothing to do with the musical journey you're going to be on," he says.

Avi seems unaware that his album has all the makings to be this year's breakout hit.

That innocence and lack of ego is part of what attracted Kiewel to the band in the first place. "They're not driven to be commercially successful, as far as I can tell. They're never overly concerned with how things will be perceived by the public," he says. Embry agrees, describing the music as

"ecstatic. [It] isn't soliciting any kind of response." And while this attitude breeds nervousness now, in the long run, it might give the band more freedom. "It's a fool's game trying to figure out what people want from you," Kiewel says.

Finding that balance between "where the music 'world' wants to take him and where he wants to be in it" will be Zahner-Isenberg's biggest challenge, says Embry. "The music is the crystal ball. And you can't really tell where you're going with it unless it's clear and you can read it."

And when that crystal ball spells critical and commercial success for Avi Buffalo—when these lovely, youthful songs find their waiting audience—Zahner-Isenberg will be the last to see it coming.

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