

## Report: Ha Ha Tonka Live in Portland

12/12/2011

*With openers Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin in tow, the Americana combo served up the twang at Portland, Oregon's Mississippi Studios on Dec. 6.*

By Tim Hinely

Both of these bands originally hail from Springfield, Missouri and had apparently met in their formative years and have been friends and occasional touring partners ever since. In Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin you've got three of the most normal looking dudes ever to grace a college campus, plus a rhythm guitarist who looks like he walked out a Kyuss video. Their pop sound is both generic and completely unique, sometimes both qualities popping up in the same song, and they wowed the enthusiastic crowd (apparently full of folks from Missouri ?!?) with a handful of cuts from their latest record, the odds and sods collection *Book Club*.

I missed Ha Ha Tonka on their last swing through town earlier this year and I must say I was bummed. Their latest record, *Death of a Decade*, is a terrific collection of homespun Americana and on this evening they brought their A-game. Vocalist/guitarist Brian Roberts pours his heart and soul into the tunes but not without a looseness, bouncing around the stage the whole time, while the others guys follow his lead. Ace cuts like "Westward Bound," "Death of a Decade," "Usual Suspects" and "Lonely Fortunes" were coupled with older tunes like "St Nick on the Fourth in a Fervor," "Hangman," "Caney Mountain" and plenty more. At three records in, these guys play like seasoned pros. They've earned their keep (and if the drummer's name really *is* Lennon Bone, well, that only ups their stock in my book).



Signs of Life in Music, Film & Culture



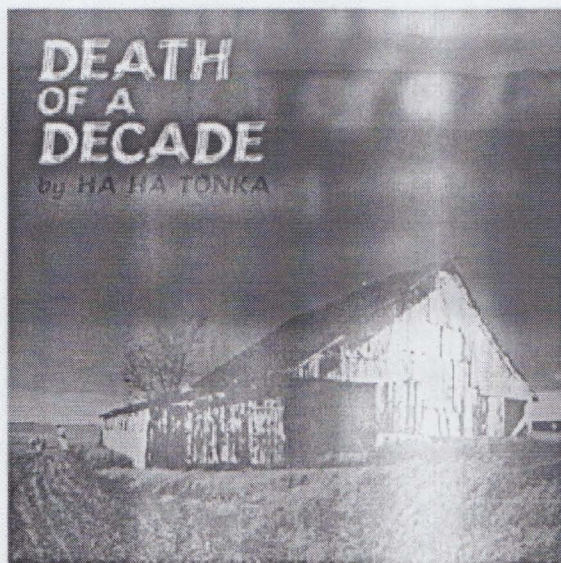
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Published at 4:00 PM on April 8, 2011

By Stephen M. Deusner

# Ha Ha Tonka: *Death of a Decade*

[Bloodshot]



Rock criminally neglects the mandolin, an instrument too often relegated to album-ending acoustic ballads or cash-in unplugged records. So the high, tight strums stand out on Ha Ha Tonka's third album, *Death of a Decade*, as Brett Anderson plays the lead riffs on "Usual Suspects," lending the song an aerodynamism that makes it an ideal opener. Elsewhere, he shades in the songs the way an artist might use a pencil to add subtle shadow. The mandolin, more prominent here than on previous Ha Ha Tonka albums, distinguishes the band from so many throwback rock acts, complementing the



band's broadly gospel harmonies and their smart lyrics.

*Death* needs such distinctions. It's a fine album that often lapses into anonymity, that never quite rocks as hard and as consistently as it should. Ha Ha Tonka have never mastered the storytelling chops of the Drive-By Truckers or the Hold Steady, but with each album, the Missouri quartet struggle to carve out their own niche as Ozark rockers. Their debut, *Buckle in the Bible Belt*, offered up a handful of ballsy, blustery songs about regional identity and healthcare woes, and the follow-up stripped their sound to an acoustic shambles, which makes *Death* sound like an attempt to split the difference between the two.

It works for a while. Anderson's mandolin races through "Made Example Of," with its rambunctious chorus and Ozark koan chorus: "If you don't change where you're going, you're gonna end up right where you're headed." Anderson sells the line like hard-won wisdom. But the Ozarkade Fire chorus of "Jesusita" can't convey the gospel fervor of the lyrics, and "Hide It Well," despite its eloquent picking, halts the album's momentum for an acoustic interlude. On the second half of *Death*, Ha Ha Tonka struggle to regain the excitement of the first, with "Dead Man's Hand" sounding like a Travis B-side and "Problem Solver," despite Anderson's exhilarated vocals, never quite gets moving.

Ha Ha Tonka are a band on a mission to parse Ozark identity in the 21st century, to do for that region what the Truckers have done for the South and the Hold Steady for the Twin Cities. But on *Death*, those heady pursuits hinder rather than help these songs, weighing them down with too many bulky concepts that slow the pace and dull the impact. Only the mandolin sounds truly purposeful and unique.





## Interview Ha Ha Tonka's Brian Roberts



by Jay Boller October 4, 2011

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The Springfield, Missouri-based alt-country rock group [Ha Ha Tonka](#) isn't a conceptual revelation. The late '80s and early '90 first saw college-radio dudes dabbling in Americana. The result? A flood of alt-country acts like Uncle Tupelo, Whiskeytown, and [The Jayhawks](#). The formula has proven sticky, as groups like [The Avett Brothers](#) and [Kings Of Leon](#) continue to get indie famous via that same aesthetic.

Ha Ha Tonka has been around under various guises since 2002, but the band is really starting to gain traction now. The boys aren't stylistically reinventing the wheel, but their execution is solid, and their most recent LP—*Death Of A Decade*—is getting plenty of press. The group isn't directly cut from the alt-country cloth either; their old-timey tinges of the Ozarks keep things interesting. In an indie-verse war between empty attempts to mimic Kraftwerk (bleepy-bloopy bands) and half-baked stabs at capturing early Wilco (neo alt-country), the latter wins out most times.

*The A.V. Club* chatted with frontman Brian Roberts before [Ha Ha Tonka's appearance Oct. 6 at Kung Fu Necktie](#) about his rural upbringing, increasing popularity, and—of course—gutting hogs.



## **Interview Ha Ha Tonka's Brian Roberts**

by Jay Boller April 15, 2011

The Springfield, Missouri-based alt-country rock group Ha Ha Tonka isn't a conceptual revelation. The late '80s and early '90 first saw college-radio dudes dabbling in Americana. The result? A flood of alt-country acts like Uncle Tupelo, Whiskeytown, and The Jayhawks. The formula has proven sticky, as groups like The Avett Brothers and Kings Of Leon continue to get indie famous via that same aesthetic.

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Ha Ha Tonka is currently on a national tour and swinging by Subterranean this Saturday, April 16. *The A.V. Club* chatted with frontman Brian Roberts before that appearance about his rural upbringing, increasing popularity, and—of course—gutting hogs.

**The A.V. Club: You're an indie band that's not from Brooklyn, but rather from the Ozarks. What was it like growing up?**

**Brian Roberts:** The Ozarks are a lot like Brooklyn. [Laughs.] I loved it.

**AVC: People picture an off-the-grid, back-woodiness—was it like that?**

**BR:** It was a little bit like that. We had a big farm; we were hog farmers.

**AVC: Really? Have you killed a hog?**

**BR:** Have I killed a hog? I have killed more hogs—I mean, for various reasons—always good reasons. But yes, I have killed hogs.

**AVC: Not passing any judgment—this isn't a PETA sabotage interview here.**

**BR:** I wasn't sure if you were asking how much blood's on my hands. When you have a large hog operation, ya know, with each litter, sometimes there'll be one or two pigs born deformed or almost stillborn. You just finish 'em off right away there. How did we get off on this?

[Roughly another minute of hog-talk transpires.]

**AVC: What was your first experience with music?**

**BR:** My mother plays piano, my dad plays guitar; there's a strong church background. However, in our church—a pretty fundamentalist church called the Church Of Christ—they didn't allow instrumentation in the services; all the singing was a capella.

**AVC: The church didn't allow music?**

**BR:** It's a [doctrinal] thing; it somehow gets in the way of your praising God. We are not a Christian band, by any stretch of the word.

**AVC: What about your parents' records and the records you first started to discover on your own?**

**BR:** My parents were children of the '60s and '70s—lots of Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan, Creedence, Eagles, and '70s rock. We were also in the rural Ozarks; there's tons of country music. So if you name any pop-country song from about 1975 to 1995, I can sing you the verses and the chorus.

**AVC: When did you get into indie music?**

**BR:** R.E.M. was the first band I got way into. I'm a disciple of Michael Stipe; I think he's the best lyricist of this past generation. If we could ever write a song like "Nightswimming," we could call it quits.

**AVC: Without being painfully modest, why do you think you guys are starting to get noticed?**

**BR:** Well, I'm going to be painfully modest and just say it's due to good fortune, a good label, and being on good tours with a lot of nice bands—Murder By Death, Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin, and Langhorne Slim. It's felt very organic. Is that too modest?

**AVC: It would have been better if you'd said, "We rule; all these other buzz-bands are stylized hype," or something like that.**

**BR:** I'll give you one negative—and I'll say this unabashedly—it's because we have the best-looking bass player in rock 'n' roll.

**AVC: Really? Is that reciprocated on the road in ways you'd imagine it would be?**

**BR:** I don't think that's an appropriate interview question for me to answer. [Laughs.]

**AVC: Where do you guys fit in the modern indie sphere?**



**BR:** I really don't know. It feels like there's a genre being carved out by bands like Dawes and Mumford & Sons. The ones [who] are at the forefront of this latest movement of the Americana/indie/pop-rock melting pot are The Avett Brothers; they're incredible.

**AVC:** When thinking of the alt-country godfathers—Uncle Tupelo, Whiskeytown—they can sort of be heard in you. But your band's rootsy element sounds older, more from-the-hills.

**BR:** Bluegrass is everywhere in the Ozarks—old folk songs, too. I think that just kind of seeps in. Even if we're using original rock instrumentation, we still try to put a twist on it—putting those four-part harmonies and older melodies in place.

**AVC:** What about Anthony Bourdain?

**BR:** They did a show on the Ozarks. Anthony Bourdain spent a week down there, and one day he spent with us, in our hometown of West Plains. We grilled out, drank, shot guns, play cards, played songs—just had a great day. It made it on the show; it was a great experience and great exposure.

**AVC:** Is he as cool as he comes off on TV?

**BR:** He is just as cool—if not cooler. Really, really nice guy—he hung out with us for like 10 hours.

**AVC:** What's one thing the press has written about you that you've really thought worked? Also, what's another thing you've read that seems off base?

**BR:** That's a tricky question coming from the press. I don't know if there's anything they get wrong. If anything, maybe they focus on the distant past. It's so hard in the music world to get our name out there, so when they talk about previous incarnations of our band, it can become confusing. Any attention we get from the press is a plus; it's a very crowded field out there.

**AVC:** You get a lot of Replacements comparisons. What's your take on that?

**BR:** I'm flattered by that. I don't hear it myself, but we try to never shy away from comparisons. A lot of people say Kings Of Leon, Mumford & Sons; I've heard Tom Petty comparisons on this record. It baffles me, but I'm a huge Tom Petty fan. I'll take it.

**AVC:** What the high point for the band so far?

**BR:** This tour. It feels like there's more momentum than there's ever been. We have summer festivals coming up, the *No Reservations* thing, our record made it to No. 2 on Amazon—that's all in the past few weeks.

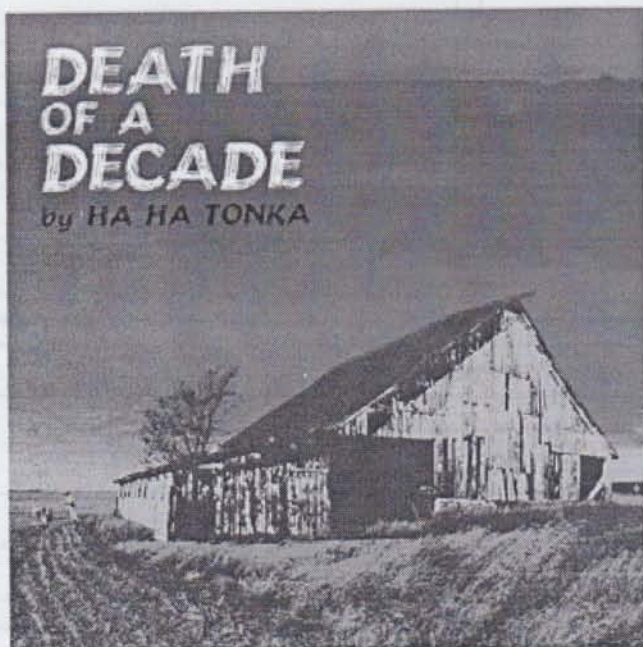


MMM-MMMP3s!

Tasty new hand-picked essential tracks

## Ha Ha Tonka - "Usual Suspects"

Posted by: mike on Jun 5, 2011



Country music really isn't our wheelhouse here at MMM-MMMP3s. But I'm calling a spade, a spade. I like this track from the "Ozarks-influenced" Ha Ha Tonka. It's southern-fried, straight-driving country with a refrain that smacks you in the face with all the subtlety of a Mack truck. But since when did subtlety count for much in pop music? Stream "**Usual Suspects**" off their latest album *Death of a Decade* available now via Bloodshot Records.

Ha Ha Tonka will be performing at Austin City Limits this September. I have the feeling that this band really tears it up live -- there's a lot of dramatic potential in that full-barrelled country, just set it up on stage and watch it explode. Oh, and here's their Twitter if you're a Twitter-er. Enjoy!



# BEATPORT

JULY 2011

## Ha Ha Tonka

### Death of a Decade

*Bloodshot Records*

The Missouri quartet, Ha Ha Tonka, follows up their masterpiece album, *Novel Sounds of the Nouveau South*, with their third Bloodshot Records release, *Death of a Decade*. The album is the southern/bluegrass style we've come to expect from the band, but with a sound that has matured, which seems to match the underlying theme of growing up. *Death of a Decade* benefits from the group's powerful harmonic vocals (specifically on "Jesusita") and a more prominent role being played by the mandolin, as Brett Anderson starts the album off with a powerful riff on "Usual Suspects." The upbeat tempo stays consistent through the first half of the album, then takes a drastic slow down on the beautiful acoustic track "Hide It Well" and never seems to really pick up to full speed again on the latter half of the album. Ha Ha Tonka's new album is best consumed in its entirety, which isn't difficult to do. Each song seems to gain more and more depth with each listen. *Death of a Decade* is an excellent follow up to *Novel Sounds* and allows for the band to show a different side of their musical style.

• Ryan Hughes





# MAVERICK

## CD REVIEWS - THE NEW RELEASES

### Jaywalkers

16 MILES

Independent

★★★★★

*Astounding abilities and proficient talents... the chemistry between the two of them is electrifying...*

Jaywalkers are the BBC Young Folk Award Finalists of 2009. This exciting young folk duo are twenty-one year old Michael Giverin and seventeen year old Jay Bradberry. Both originating from Chester, they began playing together at evening jam sessions at the local ex-servicemen's club.

Opening with *Lonesome Fiddle Blues* this instrumental serves as a wonderful introduction to this band with Jay on fiddle, Mike on mandolin and guitar and Lucy on bass. This is an uplifting and joyous track and a wonderful display of fiddle talent. In fact it was a tune picked up by Jay at a Sore Fingers Summer School—written by Vassar Clements it was the basis of Charlie Daniels' *The Devil Went Down To Georgia*. *My Sweet Little Miss* is where Jay takes vocals and really leaves you enjoying the delicate and earthy tones of her folk-rich voice. Written by Mike, the song is about a man setting off to sail at sea to earn some money and trying to get a goodbye kiss from his girlfriend. However, she doesn't trust that he'll return so they reach a compromise and she promises him a kiss if he ever comes home. *Wayfaring Stranger* is a traditional tune with no confirmed origin and a gorgeous vocal display from Jay as she sings of a spiritual journey of life into death. My favourite track on this record has to be *Shady Grove*, the traditional 18th century folk song that I have heard many times before. Again Jay's vocals are passionate and keep up with the fast pace and instrumental vibrancy of this track—overall it's a showcase of their astounding abilities and proficient talents. This record is a wonderful eleven track collection in which they show the world, being young holds no boundaries and they can master their instruments just as well as someone scoring twenty years of practice. The partnership between this duo is electrifying and full of intuitive moves—the album's success is definitely imbedded in the chemistry between the two of them and their instrumental and vocal showmanship. **Laura Bethell**  
[www.jaywalkers.co.uk](http://www.jaywalkers.co.uk)



### Ha Ha Tonka

DEATH OF A DECADE

Bloodshot Records BS181

★★★

*Energetic rock-infused roots/Americana in an indie style provided by a new generation of 'Ozark mountain daredevils'*

Named after a state park in their native Missouri, Ha Ha Tonka are a quartet who have released two albums to date. Comprising Brian Roberts (vocals, guitar), Brett Anderson (guitar, vocals), Lucas Long (bass, vocals), and Lennon Bone (drums, vocals), all songs here are credited to the band. The album was recorded in a 200 year old barn in New York and produced by Kevin McMahon (producer of the Felice Brothers and the Walkmen amongst others).

With a heady mix of pounding guitars, drums interspersed with mandolin and gospel style harmonies the Ha Ha's take few prisoners. Opening with the storming *Usual Suspects* many of these songs reflect the change from youth to manhood. As indeed Roberts sings on *Westward Bound*. 'I realise that youth is wasted on the young/Oh I know that I am wasted for that sun/Oh I know that now my wasting days are done' with a chiming guitar figure taking the melody along. This take on the Americana genre will not be to everyone's taste. The mixture of traditional instruments, electric and acoustic, are mixed with more electronic/synthetic sounds. But this brings about a freshness and a difference to that offered by the likes of the Brothers Avett and Felice. At times the message is submersed a little too much in the production and a number of the tracks are a little similar in style and sound. But, as this young band grows in confidence and continues gathering some live attention, their alternative approach to delivering a song and message should bring about some just rewards.

Check them out and make your own minds up. I don't think too many of you will be disappointed. **John Jobling**  
[www.hahatonkamusic.com](http://www.hahatonkamusic.com)



### Jake Shimabukuro

PEACE LOVE UKULELE

Hitchhike Records HRCD-1112

★★★★★

*I could sit and listen to Jake play all day long*

The ukulele has not always had a good reputation among the music community but hopefully through Jake Shimabukuro this foolish perception will change for the



### 'Collecting Skies' - The Big I Am

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CD REVIEWS • NEW RELEASES

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