



MUSIC



SAM ROBERTS TAKING THE SCENIC ROUTE TO U.S. SUCCESS

CANADIAN BANDLEADER CHARTS OWN PATH WITH SELF-RELEASED *CHEMICAL CITY*.



ARCHIVE-ALYSSA-RASHBAUM
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While Arcade Fire, the Stills and their Canadian neighbors were whisked to the States in 2004 in a whirlwind of Montreal hype, Sam Roberts and his band were contentedly taking the scenic southbound route.

"This is rock and roll. You have to blaze your own trail, and there's nothing gained from riding the coattails of a scene," Roberts said of his band's DIY ethic. "We've always been out on our own. That's the whole point. We want to make it on our own terms."

Idealistic, sure, but it's also the attitude that helped the Sam Roberts Band weather a disappointing label deal and emerge as pumped as ever to take a second charge at Stateside success.

While the 2003 debut *We Were Born in a Flame* earned the band a strong fanbase, three Juno Awards and a handful of MuchMusic Awards in Canada, the album had a slightly less obvious impact in the U.S. when it was released here in 2004.

"I remember we sold, like, 800 copies of the record in the first week," Roberts recalled of being on a major. "And I was like, 'Yes!' And they were like, 'No!' And I was like, 'Oh no, we have a problem.' I was like, 'How did we sell 800 copies? I haven't done any interviews.' It felt like it wasn't about growing something or developing a fanbase and growing. It was like, 'Make a big splash or don't do anything at all.' And that's not ever been my philosophy behind making music. That essentially put a huge damper on the first launch of the record."

The Sam Roberts Band eventually shifted to the smaller Lost Highway imprint, but when they weren't feeling much excitement from the label about their sophomore album, *Chemical City*, they decided to become independent musicians again, releasing the LP on their own Secret Brain record label.

"I thought, 'I'm not going to get involved with another record company again to go through the same song and dance and courtship rituals and smoke blown up your ass only to find out they don't believe strongly in you enough to see it through,'" Roberts said.

That the band's label was uneasy about how to market *Chemical City* is no surprise — the lush new album is a major departure from the fist-pumping rock anthems of *Flame*. It's a shift that can largely be attributed to the bandmembers' decision to ditch Montreal's icicles and biting winds for the warmer climes of Australia, where they set up shop in a Presbyterian church and wrote, recorded and generally became a commune in and of themselves for three months.

That togetherness gives *Chemical City* its cohesive feel, but it also gave Roberts and his group the guts to band together, recharge their engines and head back into the unforgiving U.S. music scene, label deal be damned.

"It's nice to be able to live two realities," Roberts said of the dichotomy of being huge stars in Canada and virtual unknowns in the U.S. "To have fans of one variety [in Canada] and then come down and we're the underdogs ... in the U.S., it really is a clean slate for us down there. We get to carve a future for ourselves."



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