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## Riffing off the cubicles they hate

**Winnipeg's Novillero is poised for great things by singing about the mundane world of work, writes ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN**

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Considering TV's nose-to-the-glass obsession with reality (whatever that is), it's curious that popular music still mostly clings to its ideal world of perfect love, personal rebellion and the endless party. As you sit in your cubicle, subservient to a job you do not love and that bears no resemblance to a beer commercial, don't you sometimes hear Peggy Lee murmuring to her trombonist, "Is that all there is . . . to pop?"

Of course, people don't switch on the car radio to be reminded of the shift they've just escaped from. But you'd think there would be room, even within an escapist medium, for some representation of the cubicle world.

Office workers of the world unite: Your band is here, and its name is Novillero. This Winnipeg band's songs have the finesse of good pop and the energy of rock. Their live set under canvas was one of the most exciting at the recent Winnipeg Folk Festival. But while the band can show you a good time, it also turns a disquieting mirror on the lives of those who toil in jobs that are too secure to give up, too full of compromise to embrace.

Rod Slaughter, the band's main songwriter, is a cubicle man himself, though he'd rather not mention, much less sing about, any of the mundane details of his job and workplace. His subject is the states of mind of those who barter bits of themselves for the next paycheque, and who sometimes call it freedom.

"I, as well, have had the desire to up and leave / Now and then and often in between," he sings in *The Art of Carrying On*, from the band's latest disc, *Aim Right for the Holes in Their Lives*. But inertia wins out, as it so often does, and counsels a position somewhere between complacency and resignation: "I'm relatively satisfied that nothing's ever going to change my world."

Other songs present characters who lose themselves in short-term strategies, never noticing what overall direction these are promoting; or who fret over social inequity while accepting that they have neither the vision nor the will to do much about it. "I propose no solution," Slaughter sings in *Laissez-Faire System*, "just a half-baked opinion." These characters may be deluded, but they have too much self-awareness to be figures of satire. They're me and you and almost everyone we know.

If Slaughter and his three band-mates (four if you count fill-in player and manager

Jack Jonasson) have an ideal world, it's the fiercely protected one in which they work out these odes to ambivalence. These aren't musicians willing to do whatever it takes to reach the toppermost of the poppermost, as the Beatles used to say.

"As soon as you're in a position where somebody else is telling you what to do and when to do it, it loses its charm," Slaughter said.

The charm of being in Novillero has been a two-stage thing. The band's first incarnation in the late nineties was larger and shaggier, with a diversity of styles that eventually seemed like too much of too many good things. That band crumbled after a couple of years and one CD. It came back to life when bassist Grant Johnson (who also has two songs on the new disc) joined original members Slaughter (keyboards), Sean Stevens (guitar) and Dave Berthiaume (drums), and the players decided to seek a more cohesive sound.

"We weren't aiming for anything in particular," Slaughter said, "but whatever happened, we wanted it to have a direction."

They eventually gravitated towards a polyvocal mod style that's physically engaging yet capable of supporting Slaughter's kind of ethical portraiture. The last remaining traces of Novillero's first extended formation is the horn section that fills out several numbers; and the final song on the album, the sublime Canadian reverie *Let's Pull Over Here*, which features a guest vocal by Nathan's Keri McTigue.

"The arrangements have become more rhythmically focused," Berthiaume said. "It's about making sure that everyone is getting the feeling of the rhythm just right, in every single detail."

The lyrics are often in flux till that state of rhythmic unity is achieved. And though their final form often has a more discursive, literary tone than most pop lyrics, Slaughter insists they have the right texture for singing. "I'm very attentive to the feel of lyrics," he said. "Chuck Berry is one of my favourite lyricists, not for the meaning, but for the way the words roll off the tongue."

In the end, it's the fluidity and drive of Novillero's music that will pull the band out of its mainly local renown, into a career that may yet allow the members to quit their day jobs and make a living from music. You've got to hope that when that happens, they don't lose their roots in the workaday world that has provoked so many good songs, and one of this year's best Canadian albums.

*Novillero plays O'Hanlon's in Regina on Friday and Amigo's in Saskatoon on Saturday.*

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