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Liam Hayes (a.k.a. Plush), singer-songwriter

BIG IN JAPAN AND THE U.K.
By Jessica Herman

Liam Hayes of the soulful soft-rock band Plush stands out in a crowd. He frequently dons subtly flared pants, a wide-lapelled jacket and ascot, and he sports a wild brown 'fro.

As a musician, however, the singer-songwriter has maintained a less visible, if not enigmatic, presence in Chicago, considering he's lived here all of his life and has been releasing records since the mid-'90s. In Japan, he's received a bit more fanfare; one admirer even presented him with a doll, handmade in his likeness.

How Hayes can inspire Plush dolls but remain virtually unknown in his hometown comes down to scarcity: not enough money, not enough albums, not enough touring. His first single, "Three-Quarters Blind Eyes," with veteran indie label Drag City (and licensed to Domino in the U.K.), could have been his big break in the mid-'90s. A slew of major labels (which Hayes won't name) courted the fledgling artist, but Hayes instead opted to stick with Drag City and Domino when it came time to license his first full-length, 1998's *More You Becomes You*.

"If you want access to [major-label] resources, your [ideas] have to converge," Hayes says. "If I have a big idea for a record, and the company I'm working with says you can do it for however much we have in our till, that's enough for me to get through one-fifth of the record. I don't want to make that kind of record."

The kind of record Hayes wants to make is one that features as many as 30 seasoned

musicians and requires dozens of hours of studio time to perfect. To that end, it's also the kind of record that requires a lot of cash (more than most indie labels can afford).

When licensing his second album, *Fed*, became too expensive for Drag City, Japanese label After Hours, which had helped Hayes put on shows in Japan to promote his first album, stepped in and released it exclusively in Japan in 2002. Even though *Rolling Stone* named *Fed* an album of the year, Hayes couldn't find a label to release it domestically.

A few years later, British label Broken Horse re-released *Fed*, and Hayes made the album available for download for a fee on his website (liamhayesandplush.com). By the time Hayes was ready to license his third full-length, *Bright Penny*, in 2009, he went back to Broken Horse and After Hours.

Neither Hayes nor his labels would divulge album sales (Broken Horse's Alun Jones commented they were "not enough considering how great Liam and his records are"), though Hayes offers that he's filled venues in Japan four times the size of those he plays in the States. "It's not a numbers sort of thing," Hayes says. "It's the level of continued interest and dedication to still following the music. People still write about

it [in Japan], and people still come out [there] even when there's not a lot of big news [such as a new release]." Jones mentions that one Japanese woman followed the Autumn Defense/Plush tour to four of the seven

shows, spending all her savings in the process.

For the most part, Hayes's performance schedule has mirrored his record releases: few and far between. He toured five cities in Japan after *Fed*, and then toured cities in the U.K. with the Broken Horse re-release and after *Bright Penny*. "I think [not touring enough] might be a big part of [the problem]," he concedes.

In the past few months, however, Hayes has booked a rare spate of live gigs in Chicago, including at Lincoln Hall, Reckless Records and a June residency at the Hideout. "It has everything to do with the songs I wrote," he says. "They're really well-suited to playing in a live setting." He's also working on a new album, which he plans to finish in the next year.

So far, Hayes's emphasis on making music his way has perhaps been at the expense of making it big. "I'm inclined to think now that what I'm doing is following my instincts. It's not like I'm off the grid," he says. "The first thing I care about is writing a good song. Otherwise, what does it matter?"

Plush plays the Hideout June 6, 13 and 20.



THE BARRETT SISTERS | GOSPEL SINGERS (Big in: Switzerland)

"It was a prayer answered," gospel chanteuse DeLois Barrett Campbell reflects. "I had always wanted to go to Europe and sing, and the Lord fixed it so we could go." Her legendary voice—the soaring soprano that established the Barrett Sisters as gospel standouts—is reduced to a hoarse whisper these days, but its warmth is palpable.

Though the family has been performing since 1941, the 84-year-old now only joins her sisters Rodessa Barrett Porter, 79, and Billie Barrett GreenBey, 81, onstage for her annual birthday concert. But at the peak of their career, between 1980 and 2000, the trio toured the world 50 times, including dozens of trips bringing holy music to the land of hole-y cheese: Switzerland loves the Barrett Sisters.

Though far from household names, it would be a stretch to say the siblings were underappreciated in Chicago. They've played Gospel Fests, were on WLS-TV's *Jubilee Showcase* for decades, and Barrett Campbell sang at the funerals of Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke and gospel's patriarch, Thomas A. Dorsey. That they are not superstars reflects partly on traditional gospel's limited audience and partly on the family's decisions to put faith before fame. Even during the height of her international success, most of Barrett Campbell's singing was done at her husband's tiny storefront church.

After performing for 70 worshippers each Sunday, the sisters say it was amazing to jet to the Montreux Jazz Festival, Bern and

Geneva to play for thousands blown away by their Andrew Sisters–inspired harmonies.

"We could not believe the way they loved what we do and loved gospel music," recalls Barrett Porter. "They used to come up to us and say, 'Oh you gave me goose bumps!'"

Though the sisters never performed at religious services in Switzerland, they didn't feel their work there was secular. "This is how we ministered," Barrett Porter explains. "We put our faith and our belief in Jesus Christ in the songs, and the people accepted and enjoyed that." In the '80s and '90s, they released a series of Swiss-only CDs, and their



annual visits ended in 2004 only because of health concerns; promoters tell them the demand for their music never diminished.—Jake Austen

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PURPLE HAYES
Dedicated Japanese fans followed Plush on tour; one crafted a doll in his likeness.