

Buttercup's new album **Send More Yellow** is a zen rallying cry against life's miseries

The long-running San Antonio group will play a release show for the LP this Friday at the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre.

by James Courtney

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A popular yarn about Vincent Van Gogh comprises the heart of Buttercup's 18-song new album **Send More Yellow**, which the band will celebrate with a Friday, March 6, album-release show.

That tale about the Dutch late-impressionist painter also supplies the release's title.

In a later-life fit of obsession, inspiration and depression, the famously troubled artist wrote feverish letters to his family, begging them to "send more yellow" paint. He was madly desirous to lose himself in ever more sunflowers and grain fields, or so the story goes.

In the hands of the beloved San Antonio band, frequently and aptly described as a life-affirming art-rock project, "send more yellow" becomes a kind of embrace of how much we need each other, how much it aches to be so in love with such a flawed world and how much power art gives us to endlessly remake ourselves.

With this album, the band's 10th since its founding nearly 25 years ago, Buttercup has achieved a difficult combination. It's delivered its most cohesive recorded statement, both musically and conceptually, and also offered up at least two or three of its absolute best songs to date.

The group's three core members, Joe Reyes, odie., and ringleader Erik Sanden, have only gotten better at inhabiting Buttercup, which will play its release show at the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre with Heavy Love and Deathray Davies also on the bill.

At a recent listening party for the album, bassist odie., responding to a question about the secret to Buttercup's fruitful collaboration, summed things up in a sagely manner.

"We're like the Spurs," he said, "because nobody cares who takes the shot and we all love each other."

The album opener, "Angel Dust," sets the tone by establishing joy in the face of adversity, not as a defense mechanism but as a core value.

The chorus on the disco-esque track echoes a criticism familiar to musicians who speak out on social issues, "shut up and sing," but in context the phrase becomes an empowering exhortation to be your full self as an act of defiance. It's the most danceable song in Buttercup's catalog by far.

The second track, "Uncle John," delves into Send More Yellow's most common theme: loss. Written for singer-guitarist Sanden's late uncle, the song is a folk-rock rollick with lyrics that dwell on the ways in which the spirit can linger through death.

When Sanden sings of a heart that "ain't full yet," he reminds himself and the listener that loss is never an excuse to shy away from love. As in other moments on this album, joy and pain exist together easily here — and in a

way that posits them not as opposing forces but as both a part of something much grander than duality.

Another standout, "Texas Sun, Furious Sun," saunters along, sitting sonically somewhere between R&B and a hypnagogic flavor of punk, taking aim at the climate crisis and those who drive it before turning introspective and, once again, offering a kind of mantra: "We must focus on what matters, we must check what's in our hearts."

"Please Send Help," a sad folk-pop song Sanden wrote for odie. in a moment of profound crisis, returns to the theme of loss. This one carries a more despondent edge, but it's still twinged with the belief that the love of other humans can carry us through.

"I felt so hurt for my friend, but so powerless to really do anything but be there," Sanden told the Current of the song's inspiration.

For its first ever recoded cover, Buttercup offers up a slow and somehow sensual take on the Dead Kennedys' classic "Let's Lynch the Landlord," a song that deepens the album's preoccupation with the path to a better world.

"We don't usually get political," Sanden told the listening party when discussing the cover, "but it just seems like the right time for this song."

"Think of the billionaires," guitarist Reyes smirked, shaking his head.

Other album standouts include "Coliseum," a gorgeous, patient tune with motorik-nodding percussion that ponders permanence from the

perspective of instant gratification, and "What a Mess," a striking and dramatic song that lurches and lingers and leers lovingly at life lived large and loose. The meaning's in the mess, it seems to posit.

In many ways, "Zero Control," the final track, is a distillation of the whole effort. Anchored by ambling, samba-flavored percussion and gentle guitar, the song looks again at real moments of loss from the life of the band.

Here, Sanden emerges from his encounter with powerlessness and the indifferent universe with a changed perspective. And, when he repeatedly sings "I have zero control," the delicate beauty, the imperfect pride in his voice is enough to induce tears. It becomes a mantra for liberation, not a complaint.

Sanden said the song was partially inspired by the experience of performing at the bedside of late great San Antonio artist Katie Pell as she prepared for her transition beyond.

"I had the thought that maybe all the years of trying to make music were just so I could play those songs for Katie," he said.