

"Composition. Production. Deliberate songcraft. The DIY ethos of independent guitar slingers and the slapdash process of recording them usually eschew these creative processes in favor of something more spontaneous, ignoring musical precision in the pursuit of that ever-elusive "edge."

There's nothing wrong with this; some of the finest records of the past thirty years were made this way. But Michigan-based foursome The Pop Project — Zach Curd (keyboards, vocals), Adam Kempa (drums), Dave Lawson (guitar, vocals) and Will Yates (bass, vocals) — have never been content with being just independent guitar

start another record?' until we had a 'solid' set of songs to record," says Curd, one-third of the Project's three-headed songwriting beast (Yates and Lawson being the other two-thirds). It's also been two years since the band started laying down tracks with Life is Life producer Andy Thompson (Puffy Ami Yumi, Andy Sturmer, Mike Doughty, Dan Wilson).

"Active producer" Thompson made contributions to Stars ranging from chord progression to toy piano parts, but he's not the only honorary Pop Project member featured on the record. While completing tracks in Kempa's basement, the band combed the fertile forests

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(Top L to R) Zach Curd, Will Yates [Bottom L to R] Adam Kempa, Dave Lawson
 Photo by Doug Coombe.

slingers. Nor are they a band concerned with any sort of edge; Curd has no problem saying their thick harmonies are influenced by 1970s schmaltz-meisters The Carpenters.

Accordingly, the preparation of their new record, Stars of Stage and Screen — now available on Suburban Sprawl Music — was anything but slapdash. A pop pastiche at turns rollicking, swoon-worthy and hilarious, Stars comes five years after the band delivered their second record, Life is Life.

"I think this speaks to our relationship as band, because no one ever said 'Maybe we should

of the Michigan indie scene, drawing a long list of guests from labelmates (Al Scheurman of the now-defunct Rescue), up-and-comers (Kaylan Mitchell of Canada) and Motor City heavyweights (Ryan Allen of Thunderbirds Are Now!, Korin Cox and Christophe Zajac-Denek of The Hard Lessons, Eddie Baranek of The Sights).

After months on the back-burner — blame home-recording procrastination and Thompson's professional obligations — you have before you Stars of Stage and Screen, a record unashamed of its overlying themes (getting sucked into the big musical machine, making it big, never getting the breaks), but

still shrugging off the label of "concept album" (though those songs about inadequacy and change and compromise in love suggest ... NO, IT'S NOT A CONCEPT ALBUM!). It is, however, 12 songs of meticulous modern pop.

It's Yates bemoaning a post-Project future stuck behind a record store counter, serving customers who choose overpriced imports over anything he ever recorded ("Never Got the Breaks"). It's Lawson singing a song that's either about a nerd shedding his awkward ways or about how sweet it would be to be a butterfly ("Totally Awesome"). It's secret-weapon Kempa hitting the skins so hard with his dick that the speakers sweat. It's Curd grinding eager next-big-things through glitchy electronics, a Broadway kick line, a circus calliope and a smooth, jazzy outro, all in one song ("You've Won the Lottery").

It's Stars of Stage and Screen, and it's taken a while to get here. So start listening!"

— Erik Adams

