

Tobin Sprout

GREAT MASTER OF ANGELIC
AURAL CANVASSES

(by Jennifer Leonard)

Tobin Sprout is into rusting metal and peeling paint. He also plays piano, guitar, and bass, and sings like an angel.

A former member of **GUIDED BY VOICES**, Sprout leads his own gig these days, in his basement studio and homegrown gallery. His photo-realistic paintings (he has been at it since 1988) adorn his second solo album on Matador Records, *Moonflower Plastic* (Welcome To My Wigwam), which follows 1996's *Carnival Boy*.

He explains, "I used to do illustration

reel to reel. Sprout thus returned from whence he came—Dayton—and signed up for official GBV membership circa the band's breakthrough LP *Propeller* (1992), the one that led to the band's signing to Scat, and from there Matador and universal acclaim.

Sprout's experiences with the suddenly touring GBV for the five years from 1992-1996 were "amazing," he exclaims, with real enthusiasm. "It was kind of a whirlwind once it took off. And then it made everything else legitimate, like it was worth our time or something."

But when Sprout and his wife, **LAURA**, who is also an artist, started having children, priorities changed: it was understandably more important to be at home with them than hitting dirty dive bar after dirty dive bar on the road. "I talked to Bob for a long time about it," he reveals. "Every since my son was born, it was getting harder and harder for me to tour. I just couldn't keep up with the band and also do the family thing."

It's easy to see that Sprout departed from GBV on good terms: Sprout was able to contribute to a few tracks on the first GBV LP since he left, *Mag Earwhig!* [It's easy to spot his voice once again lending harmony on "Jane of the Waking Universe"]. Sprout and Pollard have remained in touch since, and they've talked about doing some more stuff in the future. "We'll see," he says, teasingly. "I'd like to tour again, and I'm thinking of doing a band again; I miss the band atmosphere, doing things live to the point where you work them out and then record."

In contrast, Sprout did most everything on his own for *Carnival Boy* and the more developed *Moonflower Plastic* (Sprout has told other magazines that he spent more time on the second one) using his eight-track cassette, effects, compressor, and high-quality mics. Here is a man who likes to tinker with his effects. Distant wah-wah pedal can be heard on "Little Bit Of Dread," while Television hum adds a familiar background drone in "Angels Hang Their Socks On The Moon." He laughs about the latter when it's brought up: "It's some science show where the lady is talking about how to can things, and put lids on the jars." In the same song, the "LUCY and DEZI" reference is further about being in relationship turmoil; it's not as perfect as television, "where the days dance by."

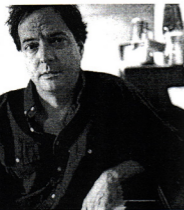
Elsewhere, Sprout's compelling, odd

chorus in "Paper Cut" ("Webster gave me light/July gave me porn/I received a token of your spoken arm") refers to print media, and turned out deeper than he originally intended. He claims they're about our being drawn to "the good," Webster's Dictionary, which lends us words to communicate our ideas, and the more "sinister end of it, which is pornography, or something." Similarly, paper "can cut you," like the title says, or it can do some good.

On the music end, Sprout is a self-trained musician and a perfectionist through and through. He admits to being obsessed with piano in high school; his grandmother gave him a musical instruction wheel to assist him with "power chords," he chuckles. "I couldn't get enough of it, and I probably drove my parents crazy just sitting there playing." Sprout also almost drove himself crazy when he used to paint five or six hours a day, to the point where his color cones were gone, and he couldn't mix paint properly. All combinations just looked like mud.

He has since overcome his aforementioned eye-fatigue problems. His art shows express in full-colored detail such subjects as rust holes on the backs of buses, chrome faucets atop porcelain sinks, and the canvas contours of an old running shoe. His LP covers are just a small sampling.

Avoiding the muddy look with his paintings is a given, but getting a little muddy in the recording studio is a whole other art form. Sprout's so-called lo-fi recordings are—by way of effects and recording techniques—actually slathered in tarnished sounds. These touches, along with Sprout's tender vocals, make for authentic musical masterpieces.



work for this magazine, and then I started painting at night. The next thing I know, it kinda took off, and I was selling the paintings." Sprout quit his job at the magazine and has been making his living in visual and musical art both ever since.

Let's backtrack a bit, to the beginning. Before the days of GBV, Sprout's band was **FIGURE 4** (1983 to 1986), formed right around the time GBV vocalist **ROBERT POLLARD** was first putting his band together. Sprout was, as he describes it, just "kinda hanging out with them and playing on some of their earliest records" in Dayton, Ohio, long before they would come to national prominence.

However, the sunny skies of Florida and a growing need to paint pulled Sprout out of Ohio and the recording studio temporarily. His painting-only career blossomed after a few years of strained eyes focused on sharply tuned canvasses, enabling him to spread his artistry across both stretched canvas and his