

Music

Something to crow about

By Joey Guerra | FOR THE CHRONICLE

Red Rooster composed 10 songs for its latest album, *Dose*. The New York-based outfit liked the tracks so much, they recorded them twice. • *Dose* is a double-disc journey through the heart of Americana

and roots music, accessorized with DJ scratches, gospel choirs and bluesy instrumentation. The first disc features revved-up, fully electric versions of 10 songs. Disc two includes intimate, acoustic renditions of the same tracks.

"It originated in having these diverse interests and tastes, and being driven by the principle of really (enjoying) what you're playing," says singer Jay Erickson, taking a break from his day job at a software firm. Red Rooster perches tonight atop the Continental Club stage, alongside label-mate Charlotte Kendrick.

Erickson founded the group with childhood friend Nat Zilkha. The two were kindergarten pals who drifted apart, only to reunite years later in a lunch line at Princeton University. They started an open-mic night at a local bar, and Red Rooster was hatched in 1998. The group released the ambitious *Dose* late last year.

The plugged-in versions of the songs incorporate everything from country and rockabilly to hushed piano balladry. The unplugged versions highlight plaintive lyrics that deal with life, love and loss amid intricate guitar work, weeping fiddles and Erickson's aching vocal delivery.

Album standout *Cold Ground* morphs from blazing guitars and honky-tonk rhythms into a mournful hymn, driven by body percussion and a gospel choir. And *Sharp Dressed Man* is radically changed by shifts in emphasis and instrumentation.

Successfully tackling the project required patience and persistence.

"There were definitely moments ... when we felt overwhelmed," Erickson says. "(But) we were driven, and I think we got some assurance from this extra layer of interest that you

don't get when you're doing a normal album."

Improvisation plays a key role in Red Rooster's work, but creating such a complex album also required serious planning. In fact, some of the album's electric tracks include samples of the acoustic versions.

"We had spreadsheets with various instrumentations, tempos, all this stuff. That was the playing field, the parameters," Erickson says. "When we actually got to recording, then we allowed for a lot more spontaneity. It's going for a feel, developing the rhythm. It's very organic. Something will pop out, and it will come into its own light."

Erickson and Zilkha are Red Rooster's core unit, but more than 20 musicians and singers have played with the band.

"It's always been a very familial kind of atmosphere," Erickson says. "It's very much the campfire vibe."

Red Rooster will stay on the road through early August. Following the tour, Erickson and Zilkha plan to write new material and continue a radio campaign behind *Dose*. It is, after all, an album that requires regular grass roots attention, because you won't see Erickson and Zilkha hawking soft drinks or making cameos on sitcoms.

"We've never had stars in our eyes. If we did, we wouldn't be playing the music we're playing," Erickson says. "The landscape is changing, but were not going to be on TRL anytime soon."

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GRADE-SCHOOL PALS: MUSIC DUO JAY ERICKSON, LEFT, AND NAT ZILKHA OF RED ROOSTER WERE CHILDHOOD FRIENDS WHO DRIFTED APART, ONLY TO REUNITE YEARS LATER AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY. COURTESY PHOTO