

WE'RE WITH THE BAND

'Insider' covers a lot of ground in The Hoodies' tour van

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It's a quarter past eight on a Sunday night, and the musty basement showroom at the Crocodile Rock Café in Allentown, Pa., is a scattered mess of tired teenagers.

More than half a dozen bands — ranging in style from generic pop-punk to out-of-tune hardcore — have already performed during the night's battle of the bands; and about to grace the stage are the clean-cut pop-rockers The Hoodies, four guys from Greece.

They arrive onstage with no entourage, no introductions and weary from a three-day trip spanning hundreds of miles.

Tonight, The Hoodies find themselves faced with the tough task of winning over a crowd of 100, which has no idea what it's in for.

Halfway through the band's emotive rock-anthem "Elegy," a buzz is brewing. The crowd in front of the stage is growing, and kids are steadily approaching The Hoodies' merchandise table, all

looking for the answer to one somewhat puzzling question: Are these guys a big deal?

It's an impressive scene, yet Hoodies frontman Dan Armbruster won't see it.

Even as the crowd swells to the size as big as any band has had that night, the shaggy-haired singer's eyes remain closed.

Over the past three-plus years that The Hoodies have been playing on a regular basis, Armbruster has grown accustomed to singing entire sets with his eyes

shut — wary of that one watchful set of eyes that isn't into his music.

"I hate looking out there and seeing one kid that isn't really digging it," says the 23-year-old. "I prefer to close my eyes and imagine we're practicing in my basement."

When it comes to a live show, no one's taking Armbruster out of his zone.

He's become the type of musician who's fixated on being in control of what he holds most dear — The Hoodies.





THE HOODIES

WHO: Pictured, clockwise from bottom left: Dan Armbruster (lead vocals/guitar), 23; Brandon Desormeaux (bass/vocals), 23; Joey Morinelli (lead guitar/vocals), 21; Paul Brenner (drums), 21; all of Greece
UPCOMING SHOW: Friday, June 27 (details TBD) **WEB SITE:** www.myspace.com/thehoodies

The show on Sunday night at the Crocodile Rock is the conclusion of a typical weekend road trip for the band. Two days earlier — on Friday, April 18 — I departed with The Hoodies from Armbruster's home (also the band's practice space) on Ledge-wood Drive in Greece for a three-day, 900-mile journey with four stops along the way.

Friday night will feature a show at SUNY Oneonta's Fine Arts Center (which actually winds up being in front of an audience of 30 people in a choir rehearsal room). Saturday involves the band dropping off 800 CDs with a friend in New Jersey to be given away at the Bamboozle Festival and, later that night, a meeting with a production company in Springfield, Pa., before heading to Allentown Sunday afternoon.

As is usually the case with Armbruster and his bandmates — bassist Brandon Desormeaux, 23; lead-guitarist Joey Morinelli, 21; and drummer Paul Brenner, 21 — the mood is pretty light inside the tour van (a 1998 Dodge Ram 15000 Mark III the guys bought last summer for \$3,800 that now has more than 100,000 miles on it). Yet this time with The Hoodies, whom I first met almost exactly a year ago, seems different. I would come to find out that they've made moves in recent months that could potentially set them up for national exposure or even a record deal.

Yet, anytime the conversation goes near these developments, I'm met by Armbruster laying down guidelines. "All right," he says. "There are a few things you can't talk about in the article," he says to me, holding out his hand as if to begin counting.

No money (referring to the payment, or lack thereof, that the band receives for shows), no mentioning of names that aren't on contracts, and then the one thing he's emphatic about: "If we mention things coming up that aren't certain yet, can you

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 — Brandon Desormeaux*

not mention them? When we say things and then they don't happen, it makes us look like liars."

Armbruster is as image-conscious about his band as any local rocker I've met. However, when it comes to talking about himself, he's completely open — whether it's about what he says is his only fear ("Making it, and then becoming Vanilla Ice.") or what actually is his biggest ("I don't want to be 28 years old and in an unsigned band."). Yet, when it comes to The Hoodies, Armbruster is like a father protecting his child with an iron fist, and he's quick to suggest that his bandmates follow suit.

"Don't say anything retarded," Armbruster tells Brenner during an interview while on the road.

Much like Morinelli and Desormeaux, Brenner is a lot less on edge. Give him a bag full of clean T-shirts from home (he sweats a lot) and his driving hat (a yellow fedora your grandfather might wear on a cruise), and Brenner's good to go.

Morinelli is the youngest member of The Hoodies, often the last to wake up after long nights and the one who asks the most questions. He's also the most underestimated. Armbruster admits that The Hoodies' most intricate songs couldn't have been finished without the help of Morinelli,

his songwriting partner.

Desormeaux (who the guys never call by his first name) is the band's most organized member, the one the others look to for managing money and establishing contacts. Desormeaux is usually more in touch with his BlackBerry than the world around him.

Ask any questions of Brenner, Morinelli or Desormeaux, and they fire back with the first thing that pops into their heads. For example, during practice in an empty classroom before the band's show at SUNY Oneonta, Desormeaux's anxiety causes him to open up about something most musicians shy away from talking about: money.

"There's a business side of music that people don't want to hear about," he says, poking away at a piano. "It's like, if you talk about money, the value of your music drops in fans' minds. We only care about (money) because we want to be able to keep doing this for a long time."

During the second night of the road trip in Springfield (just outside of Philadelphia), the band meets with Nick Tyler, co-CEO of PlayWork Productions — a music production company that's on the rise, according to Tyler — and he invites the guys out to dinner at Charlie Brown's Steakhouse.

Tyler spends most of the meal trying to educate The Hoodies on the music busi-

ness and about Mark Trombino, the accomplished producer behind career-defining albums by Jimmy Eat World (*Bleed American*), Blink 182 (*Dude Ranch*) and The Starting Line (*Say It Like You Mean It*).

This past January, Armbruster e-mailed Trombino some of the band's tracks — music that seemingly impressed the producer. And at the time of the road trip, The Hoodies and Trombino were in talks to cut a handful of new demos this summer in Los Angeles.

In an apparent attempt to persuade The Hoodies to sign with PlayWork instead of Trombino, Tyler offers up secondhand stories on the difficulties of working with Trombino. He even suggests that Trombino didn't let certain members of The Starting Line perform on their own album. "How would you like to be sitting in a hotel room for a few months while the rest of the band records the album?" Tyler asks Brenner.

(When contacted, Trombino confirmed the details of his relationship with The Hoodies. However, he had no comment in response to Tyler's words.)

However, it's during discussions like these that Armbruster can be frustrating to a reporter. Every so often, he transforms into the band's publicist, offering only formulaic responses to questions. Armbruster's reaction to the Tyler discussion ("I like him. I definitely would consider working with him.") is a little more politically correct than Desormeaux's ("That's your typical music-industry guy on this level."). Bear in mind, Tyler did put the band up for the night at his place and helped land The Hoodies a few spots on this summer's Warped Tour. (At press time, the Warped Tour shows had fallen through due to scheduling conflicts, according to Armbruster.)

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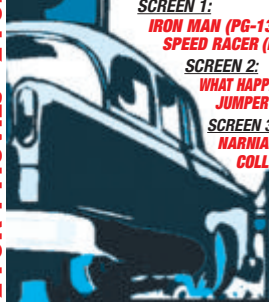
IRON MAN (PG-13): (126 minutes) 8:45 PM
SPEED RACER (PG): (129 minutes) 10:50 PM

SCREEN 2:

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS (PG-13): (99 minutes) 8:50 PM
JUMPER (PG-13): (88 minutes) 10:30 PM

SCREEN 3:

NARNIA: PRINCE CASPIAN (PG): (144 minutes) 8:40 PM
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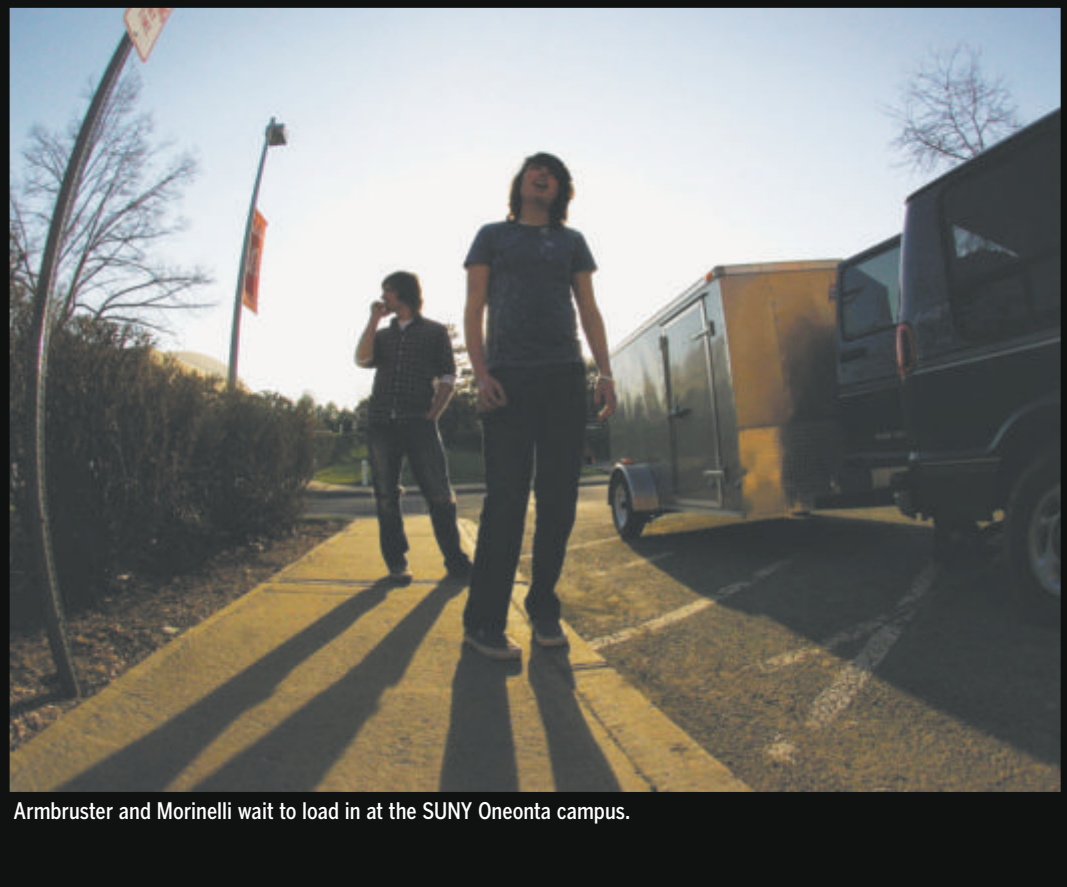
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Armbruster and Morinelli wait to load in at the SUNY Oneonta campus.

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It's not that Armbruster has a case of rock-star syndrome. That becomes abundantly clear following the show at the Crocodile Rock. When fans ask for autographs and sing The Hoodies' praises, Armbruster is reduced to girlish giggling.

"I get slightly socially awkward about it," he admits. "A lot of kids probably leave there like, 'Man, that kid is weird.'"

Armbruster spends the entire weekend deciding whether he wants the Trombino deal mentioned in this article. (At press time, Trombino and the band had signed a contract, and The Hoodies are currently in Los Angeles recording with him and are scheduled to return on May 17.) However, Armbruster and his bandmates seem less worried about the deal falling through and coming off as liars as they do about jinxing it.

The opportunity to work with someone like Trombino is what they've been working toward since 2002, when the guys met each other in band class at Greece Arcadia High School. Back then the band was a trio called The All-American Hoodies (a name they shortened after the All-American Rejects blew up), made up of Brenner, Armbruster and friend Brandon Pierce (who currently plays in Armbruster's side project, Vice Grip). The guys eventually replaced Pierce with Desormeaux and added a second guitarist — Brenner's best friend, Morinelli.

Over a late-night snack at McDonald's, Armbruster reminisces about the first song he ever wrote for The All-American Hoodies, titled "My Love Story," when he was 16. "That's what you write when you're alone in your room and girls don't like you," he says.

The simplistic aspects of that song are a far cry from where the band is now musically. On the road to Allentown, The Hoodies preview a handful of mostly unheard song demos hidden on Armbruster's iPod under working titles. It's a collection of new music that he says makes the stuff on the band's debut album, *A Place On Solid Ground*, sound "silly."

"Jon Anderton," named after Tom Cruise's character in *Minority Report*, highlights the band's ability to

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 —Dan Armbruster

write radio-ready rock, while the emotive "Slumber" and "Electric Choir" show The Hoodies reaching new heights lyrically and sonically. Yet, by far, the true gem is "Retina," which brings Armbruster's falsetto to the forefront, an apparent secret weapon considering, for the most part, the band hasn't used it up until now. "Retina" is a song Armbruster and Morinelli stayed up late to finish one recent night, even going for a walk at one point to clear their minds.

"I never thought I would be a workaholic," says Armbruster, who has a job working one day a week at Staples, while living mostly off his parents' support. "From the time I wake up to the time I go to bed, it's straight music."

Yet, The Hoodies still are at a level where its members maintain steady jobs (Desormeaux and Brenner work full-time, and Morinelli works part-time), and the success of this weekend's road trip is determined by whether or not they break even.

These are facts that never allow Armbruster to grow confused about where The Hoodies stand.

While previewing some of the new songs, Armbruster's asked if we might be witnessing a turning point for the band. With a tough bit of wry cynicism, he replies, "I'll let you know when that happens."

His caution serves as a reminder—The Hoodies haven't quite made it yet. ♦