Dismissed as “not real music” by many in the ’80s, the resurgence of Synth Pop and bands like Cincinnati’s Moonbeau are proving its endurance.
BY MIKE BREEN

Claire Muenchen and Christian Gough, aka Moonbeau

PHOTO: DEVYN GLISTA | ST.BLANC STUDIOS
In the Indie music universe, Electro Pop has become a dominating force, with Synth Pop disciples like Chvrches, The Naked and Famous, Bleachers and M83 among the numerous other popular groups that, while perhaps not so directly descended that they fit into that exact category, certainly have the neon streaks of the sound in their music. And that's not even mentioning the numerous other popular groups that, while perhaps not so directly descended that they fit into that exact category, certainly have the neon streaks of the sound in their music.

In Love
Moonbeau’s take on Synth Pop is boosted by the pair’s magnetic vocals and Gough’s rich songwriting, which is draped in swoons of the synthesizer sounds heard in classic Electro Pop, as well as other electronic flourishes and electric guitar. The band has received online attention for their four singles released over the past nine months, and now Muenchen and Gough are preparing for the release of their self-titled debut album through Cincinnati-based Old Flame Records. This Friday, hometown fans will get first crack at the new album at the band’s special release celebration at Over-the-Rhine’s Wootch and Theater. The album will be available at the show on CD and vinyl, which is being pressed in conjunction with Cincinnati’s Soul Step Records. Following the local release, Moonbeau’s debut LP will get a national rollout with the CD, vinyl and digital versions available to all on Sept. 7.

On Moonbeau, Muenchen and Gough offer 10 tracks of powerful Pop potency that transcends the instrumentation. If the album were simply their vocals and an out-of-tune piano, it would still be a melodic tour de force. The songs are instantly memorable — by just the second listen, it feels like you’ve known them for years. The resplendent Synth Pop presentation is highly enchanting in its own way; wrapping itself around the vocals, it makes for an exhilarating combination.

Laced with Gough’s New Order-like guitar leads, fluctuating background vocal textures and an array of vintage-styled Electro ticks, “In Love” is a perfect album opener. Distinctly Moonbeau’s approach is drawn to one 5-and-a-half minute song. Celestial synth arpeggios swirl to set the 80s mood, as Muenchen and Gough’s voices wrap around each other elegantly over warm digital pulsations. The lyrics have a post-queriel broken-heartedness that is tempered with optimism and faith in the power of love (“They say love is like a fire/But you can’t put it out once it ignites/And I know you’re sorry/But that doesn’t make things alright”). Together, the elements create an aura of romance and nostalgia, making it the kind of song that would soundtrack a scene in a movie where someone is rushing back to the last night of an intense summer fling spent on a bonfire-lit beach.

Another highlight is “Say What You Want Me To Say,” which bounces on a bubbling bass-synth groove and has perhaps the most unshakable chorus hook on an album overflying with tenacious hooks. The road to Moonbeau’s first album has been circuitous. Gough, a native of Northern Kentucky, is also the songwriter/frontperson for The Yugos, the band he started with his brother when he was in his early teens. He created Moonbeau around the same time as an outlet for the songs he was writing that weren’t the right fit for The Yugos, which has grown to be one of Cincinnati’s top Indie Rock outfits. The band put out their outstanding Weighing the Heart album last year through Old Flame.)

Initially, Moonbeau was just Gough and an acoustic guitar. “Then I started listening to New Order and older Pop stuff and I thought, ‘Oh, I should just do this,’” he says matter-of-factly.

After taking shape as an Electronic Pop project, Moonbeau took on various forms, though it has always centered around Gough’s writing and home recording. He performed solo shows with a laptop and guitar, but he says there was also a full-band version of Moonbeau about five years ago that simply didn’t work out. Gough also brought on individual Cincinnati musicians to play live shows — Young Colt singer/guitarist Benjamin Hines played bass and drummer Alex Murphy-White of Season Ten made up the Moonbeau live duo for a while as well. (Murphy-White is still the live drummer, while former Modern Aquatic member Kyle Kubiak currently plays bass.)

But it was when Claire Muenchen entered the picture that the Moonbeau of today began to come into focus.

After initially meeting Gough at a Yugos show, Muenchen unintentionally found herself at a Moonbeau show. Playing as a “one-man band” that night, Muenchen remembers Gough somewhat hectically moving between guitar, keyboards and computer during the performance. “I mean, he’s doing OK, but it looks like he needs a band,” Muenchen recalls thoughtfully.

Muenchen was singing and playing guitar with her own project at the time, Lipstain, for which Gough briefly played drums. The two began dating afterward, and soon Gough asked if Muenchen would sing on the Moonbeau recordings he’d been making.

Eventually, she was coaxed into joining Gough on stage at a Cincinnati show. The couple cites the next show as solidifying Moonbeau’s status as a duo: Both were working at Urban Outfitters at the time, and Gough was offered a gig to play at a corporate UO event in Phoenix. Gough suggested Moonbeau and “for real” so that they could both go on the trip for free. She’s been onstage at every Moonbeau show since.

While having your romantic partner also be your creative partner sometimes puts pressure on street relationships, it seems to have had the opposite effect in Muenchen’s and Gough’s case. They got engaged a year ago and are planning to get married next year.

Space Age Love Songs
Standing on a street corner in Over-the-Rhine and trying to locate the studios of Inhaler — a music and community broadcast platform where I’m to interview Muenchen and Gough — I spot them and they’re standing just as they walked up the sidewalk on the other side of Sycamore Street. Though we’ve not met before, I’ve seen them perform and they’re a striking pair. Gough is tall, at least 6-foot-3, while Muenchen is petite. I’ve also seen recent Moonbeau promo photos, and though they’re not in full stage outfits — which can sometimes be ‘80s-inspired to the extreme, like the angular, colorful graphics on the suit Gough wore for their 2017 Cincinnati Entertainment Awards performance — he is sporting a worthy cog in a band on a hot summer day.

One inside and into our conservatory, their dynamic remains that of a young couple deeply close and still in the twilight of their love (they’ve been dating for three years), which is befitting given the passionate and romantic aura evident in Moonbeau’s music. Having the band to bond over seems to be a part of their close-ness. Gough is the primary artistic engine behind the band, having written and constructed all of the backing tracks for the songs, but Muenchen handles a lot of the non-musical activities that keep the project together and moving forward.

Both complement each other — during our chat, they share knowing smiles when talking about an upcoming, unannounced show and the split personalities that go into being part of Moonbeau and for The Yugos. When Gough starts talking about how he’s anxious to perform his newer material for people but can’t because Moonbeau’s debut album (completed two years ago) is just now being released, Muenchen encourages him to support it. Muenchen gently steers him back to the practicality of the situation.

“You have spent a lot of time with (the new album’s) songs,” she says, “and others have not.”

“It helps to be engaged, to be in a relationship, and be in the band, because we both know how much we want what we’re trying to do,” Gough says. “We just talk about everything.”

Muenchen has been working on the business side by trying to book out-of-town shows and taking on social media duties, which has become especially important for artists on the way up. She says she loves engaging with fans and building a persona for the group. While that persona has a bit of mystique (there’s never anything too personal or day-to-day and Moonbeau’s Twitter is currently tracking the cycle of the moon leading up to album release day), it’s also very personable and approachable, something followers appreciate.

“We have direct-messages with people where we’ve been like, ‘Yeah, let’s go thrift shopping’ or ‘Let’s hang out after the show,’” Muenchen says. “We’ve hung out with people we’ve only met through Moonbeau.”

A more mysterious side of Moonbeau’s image manifests itself somewhat in the artwork and imagery associated with the group. As with the earlier singles, the cover art for the new album uses the aesthetics of Synthwave, a musical subgenre based on ’80s video game music and movie soundtracks. (Moonbeau has turned to some like-minded artists and fans among the music’s hardcore online community.) Synthwave (and Vaporwave) graphics sometimes veer into detached irony or vintage digital iconography, but for the cover of Moonbeau’s album, Andrew Walker (who has done other cover art for musical acts in the same realm) used pale blue and purple, with the band’s name written in the brushed font of an ’80s movie poster. In the center of the breezy cover is a Patrick Nagel-like image of a woman’s eyes peering through pulled-down window blinds. To mark the occasion of the album’s imminent release, Muenchen and Gough got the image tattooed on their arms.

On the Tracks
Moonbeau’s live appearances have been what has made the band a popular draw in the Cincinnati area and earned it a loyal local following. It’s part dance party, part mood elevator, as the mix of dance beats, the musicians’ jovous performance and the music’s colorful exuberance combine to create the kind of experience that is hard to leave in a bad mood.

Early on, though the music was essentially the same and Gough had always received positive feedback for it, when he played solo shows, he felt a kind of backlash reminiscent of the anti-Synth Pop animosity of yesteryear. Perhaps because he was playing some of the same “Rock” venues as The Yugos, where audiences were used to the force of a live band and the drummers hearing things like, “It’s one of those laptop bands,” in response to his shows.
He also had his own built-in expectations from playing regularly with The Yugos, which led him to bring in additional players. Besides dousing some of his insecurities about audience reaction, when he began performing with drummer Murphy-White, he could feel the boost in power while playing.

"Having a live drummer adds a lot of energy to the show," Gough says. "Having a drum kit behind you, you can really feel the drums."

He also thinks there is something about the optics of having more musicians on stage. When Murphy-White and Kubiak play with Moonbeau, they're basically layering the drums and bass sound. The backing tracks that Gough recorded when creating the songs are the same ones that run through the speakers now as they were when he was alone, including all of the drums and bass.

"When someone comes to see you and it's just a guitar and laptop, everybody just kind of looks at you," Gough theorizes. "But then if you have a full band, and it sounds like a full band, they look at you and are like, 'Oh, it's a full band. Cool band. I'm gonna get into it now.'"

"We don't do it to try and trick anyone!" Muenchen clarifies.

Though he seems to accept the 'full band on stage' audio illusion and enjoys what having other musicians brings to his own performance energy, Gough still seems somewhat perplexed by the disconnect. When he went to see Bleachers in Columbus, Ohio, he says he noticed a similar moment of stagecraft from the opening band.

He saw a prominent synth on stage that seemed to be going unused despite the sound it would make being clearly audible throughout a song, and he watched as the singer briefly went over to it and played it for a few seconds. Like having more people on stage, he believes it was an effort to draw attention from the programmed backing tracks.

A visit to the Bunbury festival a couple of years ago made him less concerned with 'getting caught' playing with tracks.

"Every single band we saw was using tracks," he says. "I think everyone who's using tracks should not feel self-conscious about it because it just helps with the textures (of the live sound). You still get to see the band."

**Just Can't Get Enough**

So how do two musicians born in the '90s win a style of music popularized during the Reagan Administration, but also accurately capturing the spirit of the era's imagery and fashion?

Musically, it's a testament to the Synth Pop revival of the past decade. Like how The Rolling Stones once had people searching for the source material and falling in love with American Blues originators like Howlin' Wolf, Gough's favorite contemporary Electro Pop artists had him tracing back their steps.

"I listen to a lot of modern bands like The Drums that are in the style of New Order," says Gough, who is also a big fan of Cut Copy, The Naked and Famous and the aforementioned Bleachers. "Someone pointed out that all these bands I was listening to kinda sound like New Order. So, I checked them out and loved it."

But his initial exposure to '80s Synth Pop goes back to when he was even younger, though the memory of it was repressed temporarily. As a child, his brother had checked A Flock of Seagulls' first album out of the library and they listened to it regularly. Years later, he listened to the album again and the memories flooded back.

"I was like, 'I remember all of these songs!'" Gough says.

Everything that has been written about Moonbeau references the '80s, for obvious reasons. Gough understands it and is a party to it, but he says he sometimes finds it odd and tiring to be constantly referencing the decade when talking about Moonbeau.

"It's kind of funny how you can just put a decade on something — like, 'That's '80s' — and it puts an image in your head," he says. "I kind of hate saying it over and over again — we do interviews and I'll keep saying '80s over and over. I wish I could just stop talking about it."

Quickly realizing the contradiction of what he just said, Gough softly adds, "But I guess it does kind of define our music though."

"And your fashion, my fashion and the artwork," Muenchen pointedly reminds him.

Though they didn't experience it in person, the '80s seem to mean something deeper to both musicians, and it's not simply that some of the bands they like borrow from the music of the era. Or even that they're entrenched in creating and performing their own music in a style that originated from that time period.

Like Sha Na Na was to the '50s or Steampunk participants are to the 19th century, Moonbeau's members are drawn to the culture of the '80s because it makes them feel good.

"I grew up watching Ferris Bueller's Day Off, because we had it on VHS and it played all the time," Gough says. "I just loved it. That's what makes me happy. And I kind of got away from it for a long time. But like with Flock of Seagulls... and the fashions... I don't know." 

"It just makes me feel a certain way," he says contemplatively. "I could cry, thinking about it."

Moonbeau presents a hometown release party for its new album Friday at Woodward Theater. Tickets/more show info: woodwardtheater.com.