

ON THE ROAD WITH OF MONTREAL

Cheese castles, dragons and hanging with Prince – Kevin Barnes' crew and Janelle Monáe get their freak on in the US

PABST THEATER, MILWAUKEE, FRIDAY, SEPT 24

If Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is known for anything – apart from the Violent Femmes – it's beer, and there's plenty to be had backstage before Of Montreal's show tonight at the Pabst Theater. As *NME* happily works its way through the output of several local breweries, various Of Montrealites begin to arrive and help themselves to dinner. "I wish every venue was like this," sighs amiable bassist/keyboardist Nicholas Dobbratz as he digs into the impressive spread.

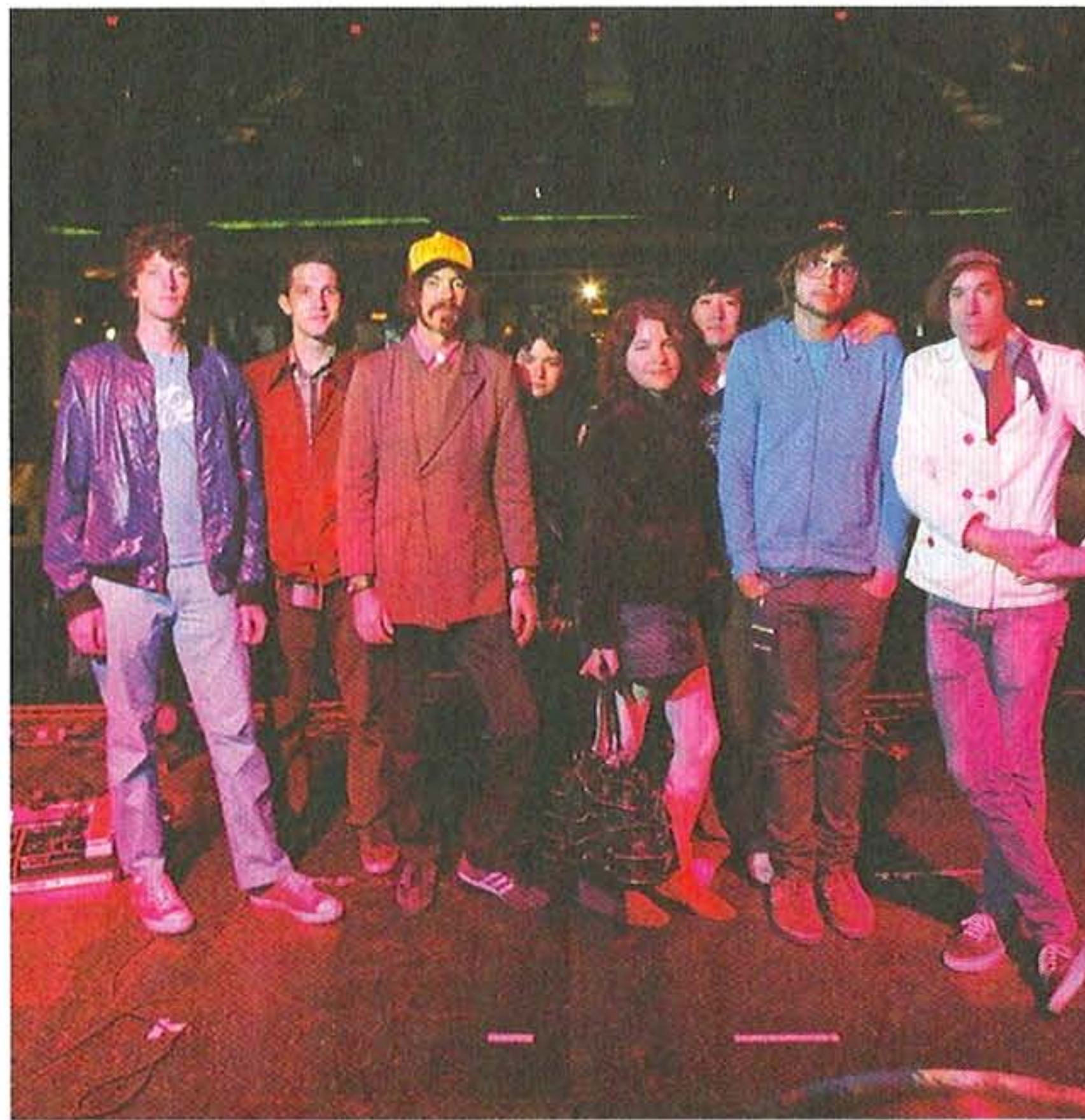
The Pabst Theater is full of secret tunnels and staircases – later on, *NME*'s intrepid photographer will venture right up to the top of the catwalk that spans the venue's fly-reel apparatus in the company of Kevin Barnes and a gentleman from Janelle Monáe's entourage who goes by the name of 'z.o'.

Janelle Monáe? Oh, didn't we mention she's here too? Indeed she is – in fact, this is billed as a double headline tour.

As the two acts retire to their respective dressing rooms to prepare, Monáe's genial tour manager regales *NME* with tales of last night's show in Minneapolis: "Yeah, Prince was there," he says matter-of-factly. "When you get to know him, he's a real gentleman." It'll surprise no-one to learn that The Purple One is a huge fan of Monáe; he entertained her entourage, along with a very, very excited Kevin Barnes, at Paisley Park yesterday. "Prince gave me a hug," Barnes will beam to *NME* later. "It was a beautiful experience."

Monáe is on first, and she and her immaculately suited band are formidably ferocious. Their set is clearly planned down to the second, with several set-pieces (like bringing out an easel and canvas during 'Mushrooms & Roses'). And boy, can Janelle sing.

Of Montreal up the theatrical ante even further, with Barnes a picture of flamboyance in wrap-around miniskirt, blue eyeliner, orange tights and amazing turquoise boots. He's joined onstage by seven bandmates made up in a faux-kabuki style and an assortment of characters who'd even have The Flaming Lips scratching their heads: gun-toting goldfish, sinister pyjama-clad skeleton children, a huge Michelin man with a giant lightglobe for a head. "My brother [artist David Barnes] designed them all," Barnes explains to *NME* after the gig. "He has an



incredible imagination. His sketchbooks are outrageous.

"This is the first tour where we've created and engineered everything on our own," he continues. "We've discovered that a lot of the ideas we had originally didn't work the way we envisaged, so we've had to modify them. We were trying to make something more abstract... because everything we've done [before] has been comical and fun and playful. But..." he chuckles ruefully, "...we discovered it just didn't work. So we've gone back to being playful and crazy again."

It seems to work out just fine tonight. "Grandmothers and aunts sewed this stuff," confides the band's publicist during 'Hydra Fancies', as we watch Barnes ride around on a giant pantomime dragon that requires four people to operate. The effect is crazy, alright; frankly, if you haven't seen an androgynous boy/girl dry-humping a roadie in a gold bodysuit and a pig mask, you haven't really lived.

After 'A Sentence Of Sorts In Kongsvinger' closes the main set, Monáe and band reappear to join Of Montreal onstage for an exuberant Michael Jackson medley encore of 'Thriller', 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'', and 'PYT (Pretty Young Thing)'. The crowd goes batshit.

Backstage after the show, Monáe's crew unleash some of the most jaw-dropping freestyling you'll ever see, further reinforcing that they are Way Cooler Than Us. In a good way, of course. As 2am rolls round, everyone starts peeling off towards the band buses, and *NME* soon follows suit. Tomorrow: Chicago.

RIVIERA THEATER, CHICAGO, SAT, SEPT 25

The outskirts of the city are grim – cracked pavements, foreclosed businesses and a general air of down-at-heelness. It's a two-hour drive here from Milwaukee, a journey that takes you straight through the heart of Middle America via fun-sounding places like the Bong Recreation Reserve and the Mars Cheese Castle.

In contrast to its surroundings, Chicago itself is a gleaming portrait of space-age futurism. We rendezvous with the band after soundcheck at The Riviera Theater, an ornate former jazz-era cinema.

There's an evil bug going around the bus – poor keyboardist Thayer Sarrano looks particularly forlorn, while Barnes is sipping herbal tea and sniffing a lot. Monáe and co, however, seem to be in rude health and tear out another ripsnorter of a set. As with last night, Barnes joins her onstage for 'Make The Bus', much to the crowd's delight.

The Barnes/Monáe axis is a fascinating one. They're clearly firm friends: "We're super-close. I feel like I've known her for about 100 years," Barnes tells us. For her part, Monáe says simply: "They are my favourites. 100 per cent."

Onstage, it's plain to see what they share: a penchant for theatrics and an idiosyncratic, restless creative vision that has little regard for genre boundaries. "We're all very free," suggests Barnes of the two camps' similarities. "We don't want to do anything boring or clichéd – we just want to do something exceptional. Maybe we come from different places, but that's the great thing about art: it can break down barriers. That's what's so beautiful about it."

Of Montreal also shake off their illnesses firmly nail their set. "That was definitely the best show we've played so far," enthuses bassist Davey Pierce in the wings before the encore. The MJ medley gets another work-out, and again the crowd go absolutely

bananas for it, especially when Monáe breaks into a flawless moonwalk.

After the show, we follow guitarist/violinist K Ishibashi back to one of Of Montreal's two buses ("There's the party bus and the quiet bus," he explains).

Eventually, the band go their separate ways – some to bed, the rest for a few drinks before the 2am bus call. *NME* is delighted to tag along with the latter; Barnes retires early. He's trying to avoid the lurgy, and since this is the penultimate show of the tour's first leg, he wants to finish on a high. "So far, I can't think of any tour that's been more fun and fulfilling," he tells us before he crashes. "Artistically and emotionally... It's been amazing." *Tom Hawking*

VIEW FROM THE CROWD



Jeffrey Wade, überfan, 28

"Kevin captures something I don't think anyone else is capturing now. I've had other artists I've really loved, but not like this. That sounds gushy (laughs). I do have an Of Montreal tattoo... (reveals a pretty impressive piece of work)."