

# WINNEBAGO MEN

**REAL ESTATE** MAP OUT A REFINED TRAJECTORY ON THEIR THIRD ALBUM, *ATLAS*. BY CELIA SHATZMAN. PHOTOGRAPHED BY SUNNY SHOKRAE

ON AN UNSEASONABLY WARM winter day, shoppers peruse Christmas trees neatly arranged on a Brooklyn block. A 1970s-era Winnebago is parked on the corner. Inside, the founding members of Real Estate settle onto a bench with worn, mustard-yellow plaid upholstery. A similarly vintage aesthetic is on full sonic display in *Atlas*, the band's third album (and first in three years). Out March 4 via Domino, the record rides the group's signature surf-rock wave while feeling somehow more sophisticated than their previous efforts.

Singer-guitarist Martin Courtney, 28; guitarist Matt Mondanile, 29; and bassist Alex Bleeker, 27, hand-picked the location of our interview, but they didn't choose the spot just because they thought it looked cool. "Our friend runs the tree stand every year," Bleeker explains. "It's mostly staffed by artists and musicians, so we've all hung out here—invariably we'll have a friend working. It becomes this nice community location."

For a band that calls themselves Real Estate, it makes sense that they would place value in developing a sense of community. Growing up in Ridgewood, New Jersey, the trio met in high school through the local music scene. "We were three of the closest friends, but we never had our own band together," Bleeker says. They briefly overlapped in a covers act called Marc (named after a band in *Empire Records*) that played songs by The Strokes, Ben Folds Five, and Weezer. "This was the seed," says Bleeker, explaining that Real Estate evolved from getting together and playing the songs that hooked them on music in the first place.

The three scattered for college, but jammed during holiday and summer breaks. "We'd always end up playing music together in one of our basements, and it was really informal and casual," Bleeker says. "After college, it was really never much of a question—just an obvious extension of what we'd been doing for a long time."

Real Estate officially formed in 2008, and drummer Jackson Pollis and keyboardist Matt Kallman now round out the band. Courtney and Bleeker currently live in Brooklyn, while Mondanile leads a bicoastal life, split between Los Angeles and New York. Real Estate isn't the only band in their lives at the moment—Mondanile's side project, Ducktails, began as a solo effort, while Bleeker takes the lead on Alex Bleeker and The Freaks.

They regrouped for the new album and the guys agree that when they work on music for

Real Estate, it has a different vibe than their other projects—it's a group effort, especially on *Atlas*. "Even in terms of the writing, it was democratic," Courtney says. The band was

open to experimenting and new ideas, giving them a slightly different, more adventurous sound. "Each song is like its own little universe within the record and they all work

well together, but they're actually more eclectic-sounding than our other records," says Mondanile.

For their sophomore album, *Days*, Real Estate went into the studio with only half of the material written. *Atlas*, on the other hand, was recorded in two weeks, after being crafted over the course of a year—and it shows. The sound is remarkably clean and clear, with Courtney's soothing vocals rising above atmospheric instrumentation. "We have a lot more long stretches with no vocals on them," Courtney

says. "Part of our style is focusing on instrumentals and the lyrics are there in addition."

Seeking fresh air, the band hops out of the Winnebago and ambles through a nearby park filled with squealing kids, trendy twentysomethings, frolicking dogs, and some musician friends. When asked about their upcoming tour, the initial response is some grumbling about life on the road and freezing European winters. But then Mondanile concedes that he enjoys traveling. "I like being in a lot of different places in a close period of time," he

says. "It's crazy, a weird feeling. When would you get the chance to do that any other time in your life?" Courtney and Bleeker nod in agreement.

"It's really cool knowing you're in Shanghai with your friends from high school and you did it yourself," Courtney says. Ultimately, Real Estate's music isn't just for their fans—it's for their teenage selves. "The first time I had this thought I was really excited: If I had heard our band when I was in 10th grade, I'd be really into this," Courtney says. "It would be my favorite band just because we're making the music that we like."



FROM LEFT: matt mondanile, martin courtney, and alex bleeker.