

# Rockin' horse

By Stephan Boissonneault

There's a kitchenette and resting on top of it is a can of Brunswick sardines and a row of crackers. A group of six guys grab a few crackers and the salted fish before gravitating towards a room full of reel-to-reel tape machines, speakers, patch cables, a lava lamp, a hanging bass guitar and various vintage music memorabilia and gear. Together they listen to an unreleased recording of dulcet acoustic guitar and vocals — almost with a lightly sarcastic Country & Western cadence.

We're in the control room of Sud-Ouest Recording Services in Verdun, the physical home of Baby Horse Records, a fledgling artist-run label that has so far focused on releasing bits of alt-country, indie folk, Canadiana and good ol' rock 'n' roll. The man behind the mixer is Matt Damron, co-founder of Baby Horse Records, alongside William Poulin — who also both run Sud-Ouest Recording Services.

Poulin looks through the window of the control room into the live studio room, a space full of vintage instruments and gear, like a Hohner organ, soft cherry red Gretsch guitar or a warm Fender vintage tube amp. The walls surrounding the control room window are covered in wood paneling, resembling that of a vintage barn door and the ground is decked out in a psychedelic red rug. It's like taking a snapshot out of the old '60s recording studios, having the same aura as a place where a band like Crosby, Stills & Nash would have recorded their debut.

"Matt and I are kind of obsessed with old vintage gear and we definitely nerd out on how they recorded songs back then," Poulin says. "This kind of bygone era vibe is sort of modeled after Sun Records or like the Motown Studios. It's music made by musicians for musicians."

Baby Horse Records got its start around three years ago, but really started to take off a few months into the pandemic. Before June 2020, Poulin and Damron were looking to upgrade from their old band's studio in Rosemont and wanted to move closer to the Sud-Ouest, where they were getting to know a community of musicians who more or less all met each other at the Bar de Courcelle open mics in Saint-Henri.

"It was a very DIY project to find this space and build it into what you see now," Poulin says. "We all had CERB and I told Matt, 'If we're going to try and do a better built studio, maybe we should do it now.'"

Since then, Baby Horse has been steadily releasing material from artists like Joe Abbott, That Nikki You Know, Bluebird and other artists who have roots in Montreal's Sud-Ouest.

"You could definitely say there was a shortage of not musicians, but ways to get music heard from the Sud-Ouest," Damron says.

"We needed an outlet to put out this music and put Sud-Ouest on the map, but also let people know we're all making this stuff together," Poulin adds.

The word "together" sums up the thematic glue and aesthetic of Baby Horse Records. While Poulin and Damron are the founders and main engineers of Baby Horse Records, they have a rotating network of musician friends that form the house band of Sud-Ouest Recording Services, and guest on various Baby Horse projects. They're also all multi-



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instrumentalists who play a bit of everything, feature on each other's projects and help promote the label in various ways.

We have: Erik Fines (whose new country EP is currently playing on the studio speakers), Frisco Lee, another wizard keyboard player who brings in talent to the studio by "poaching" musicians from the Bar de Courcelle open mic, and Freddy Poulin, the studio drummer who is on a bulk of the Baby Horse recordings.

"For most of the stuff, Will and I are the engineers, producers, mixers — whatever you wanna call it — but everyone kind of does a bit of everything," Damron says. "We're all very fortunate that we all speak the same language and we are all doing stuff in the service of the song or the project. It's not about us."

Continuing, we have Dan Beasy, the core songwriter of the Baby Horse project, Bluebird, who also fills the role as the studio painter (he's currently painting the studio door a nice burnt orange) and general handyman.

Basically, Baby Horse is a kind of musical collective — a smaller, but similar version of the Wrecking Crew from Los Angeles in the '60s and '70s.

"We want people to know that it's kind of like a family-run studio and label," Lee says. "I think there are people who want to know that something like this exists."

The crew also all built the Sud-Ouest studio together, learning carpentry from their friend Nick Clayton, rigging up lights, assembling walls, brushing the wood panels and creating a very welcoming ambiance to the whole space. The aforementioned wood wall — which really ties the room together — is made out of close to 100-year-old wood stripped from a friend's house.

"We got a truck and loaded it and since our neighbours in the building are woodworkers, they were able to take all the planks and cut them so they were parallel. Then Erik and the gang brushed them and oiled them," Poulin says.

Another member of Baby Horse is one James Healey, a sound engineer who enjoys taking recording projects outside of the Sud-Ouest space and using old school mono recording techniques inside of places like century-old churches or log cabins.

"Stuff where you surround a bluegrass band around a single mic and then apply that to modern stereo techniques," Healey chimes in. "Every room has its own reflection and gets baked into the record. We did that first Baby Horse recording in a church in Wakefield."

"It's cool 'cause we can go from a bigger production with a full band live or do a field recording session with James," Damron says. "We have one coming out called the Lac Sam Sessions that was recorded in a cabin."

The Baby Horse family is definitely making music for themselves but is still looking to carve out a piece of the musical map for their artists. They're still quite new and only have room to grow, already working with a few artists outside of Montreal, with plans to do more.

"It's hard to play and write songs and have nobody encourage you to actually do something with it, so that's what Baby Horse does for me," Beasy says. "We're looking at a scene that is constantly getting devastated, like with the Sirius XM thing, so it's nice to have this community and solidarity in a climate that is not very, let's face it, friendly for the DIY artist."

The conversation with the Baby Horse crew soon turns into a free jam with Fines on drums, Beasy on bass, Poulin on guitar and Lee on a wurlitzer. It's rock 'n' roll with a surfy edge made by musicians who have a chemistry that transcends the label.

"Should we start a surf band?" Poulin laughs.

With the collective talent of this musical family, anything is possible.