

## THE FIRE THIS TIME | By Billy Eck '07

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, show me where them bombs will fall," Win Butler '98 sings on "Black Mirror," the song that opens and sets the tone for *Neon Bible* (Merge Records, 2007), the second album from his group, the Arcade Fire. In the past four years, the Arcade Fire have gone from being a little-known, much-admired Montreal band to standard-bearers for independent rock, playing concerts with U2, David Bowie and David Byrne, appearing on "Saturday Night Live" and earning glowing reviews in both the music and mainstream press, including *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*.

Win Butler and his brother Will '01, the group's keyboard player, grew up in Texas and came east to attend Exeter, where their father, Ned Butler '61, had gone to school. In interviews, Win has described listening to Houston radio stations and discovering '80s groups like the Cure and Echo and the Bunnymen, as well as more contemporary groups like Nirvana and Bush. At Exeter, friends introduced him to the music of Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen, who would become strong influences on the Arcade Fire. In fact, part of what makes the group's music so interesting is their fusion of the edgy rhythms of their '80s glam and new-wave influences with the earnestness of American singer-songwriters.

According to his dorm adviser, science instructor Chris Matlack, Win's creativity was already evident at Exeter. "But I always expected he would become a filmmaker," Mr. Matlack says. "He made a short film for his senior project, and it was clever, it was clean, and it was hilarious. I couldn't believe a senior had made it. Win always had time for people, he always had a smile. But he also had this extra spark—he was very endearing and very creative. He had a soul." Win used the guitar given to him by his grandfather, the great jazz guitarist Alvin Rey, to relax and express himself after classes, but he was not as involved with school bands as his younger brother Will would be.

After graduation, Win went to Sarah Lawrence College in New York to study creative writing and photography, but he left after a year and moved first to Cambridge, MA, and then to Montreal. There, in short order, he began performing his own music and met his future collaborator and wife, Régine Chassagne, who was studying medieval

music at McGill University. Together, they founded the Arcade Fire, along with guitarist Richard Reed Parry, bass player Tim Kingsbury, violinist Sarah Neufeld, drummer Jeremy Gara and, of course, Will Butler. They recorded a promising self-titled EP, which, along with their energetic live show, got them signed to independent rock label Merge Records.

But how did this group of unknowns sell over half a million copies of their debut album, *Funeral*? Undeniably, their sheer talent and singularity played a large role in this phenomenon. *Funeral* owes part of its unique sound to the wide range of styles it draws on, including bossa nova, punk and new wave, but their music is more than the sum of its parts. The album is simultaneously empowering and devastating, energetic and melancholy. The dedication to dead friends and family members in *Funeral* makes its music even more poignant, and the wide range of instruments—not just guitar, drums, bass and piano, but also violin, viola, xylophone, French horn, accordion and harp—gives the album a unique, unforgettable sound. The Arcade Fire received an uncommonly high rating from an online review at



Led by Win Butler '98 (standing), the Arcade Fire have become one of the most popular indie rock bands now recording. Their U.S. tour begins in late April and continues through early summer.

pitchforkmedia.com, which helped expose them to a wider audience. David Bowie also recruited more fans for the band after seeing them perform, as did U2.

Their early success seems destined to last. Released nearly three years after their debut album, *Neon Bible* immediately hit No. 2 on the U.S. *Billboard* charts, easily topping *Funeral*'s early sales. And it's easy to see why. Unlike so many bands with successful debuts, the Arcade Fire took a risk and changed their style significantly. Where *Funeral* is loud, rebellious and young, *Neon Bible* is disillusioned and somber. This isn't to say the album lacks the energy of its predecessor; "No Cars Go" is one of their loudest, most forceful songs. The album also seems more rooted in American music than their previous outing, especially the songs of Bruce Springsteen. Their grandiose sound has grown less naive, more mature, but the Arcade Fire haven't lost a bit of their energy or passion. ●

Billy Eck '07 hosts the WPEA radio show "Left of the Dial." For more information about the Arcade Fire, go to [www.arcadefire.com](http://www.arcadefire.com).