

The members of Time Crash are justifiably proud of the band's GuiTARDIS, the work of Chicago-based Rice Custom Guitars.

TODD DIEDERICH

# Time Crash brings "trock" across the pond

Beloved BBC sci-fi franchise *Doctor Who* turns 50 this week, and at least one Chicago band is ready to celebrate.

By MEGAN KIRBY

**Y**ou can go to shows for years and never see a Klingon play guitar. ¶ The many subspecies of nerd rock thrive at house concerts, comic conventions, and sometimes even ordinary music venues—but because the bands involved tend to cluster on bills with like-minded acts, outsiders are unlikely to stumble into this geek ecosystem.

Nerd rock harnesses the power of fan-fiction writers, cosplayers, and obsessive episode rewatchers, benefiting from legions of ready-made fans who love inside references to their favorite books, TV shows, video games, and movies. The concerts provide safe spaces where hard-core fans can arrive in costume and sing along with other devotees—when the entire crowd is on the same wavelength, nobody has to worry about coming off as a dweeb. The downside of this cozy community is that sometimes clever wordplay and inside jokes take precedence over chops; fans might forgive sloppy guitars or weak drumming for an excellent Captain Kirk pun.

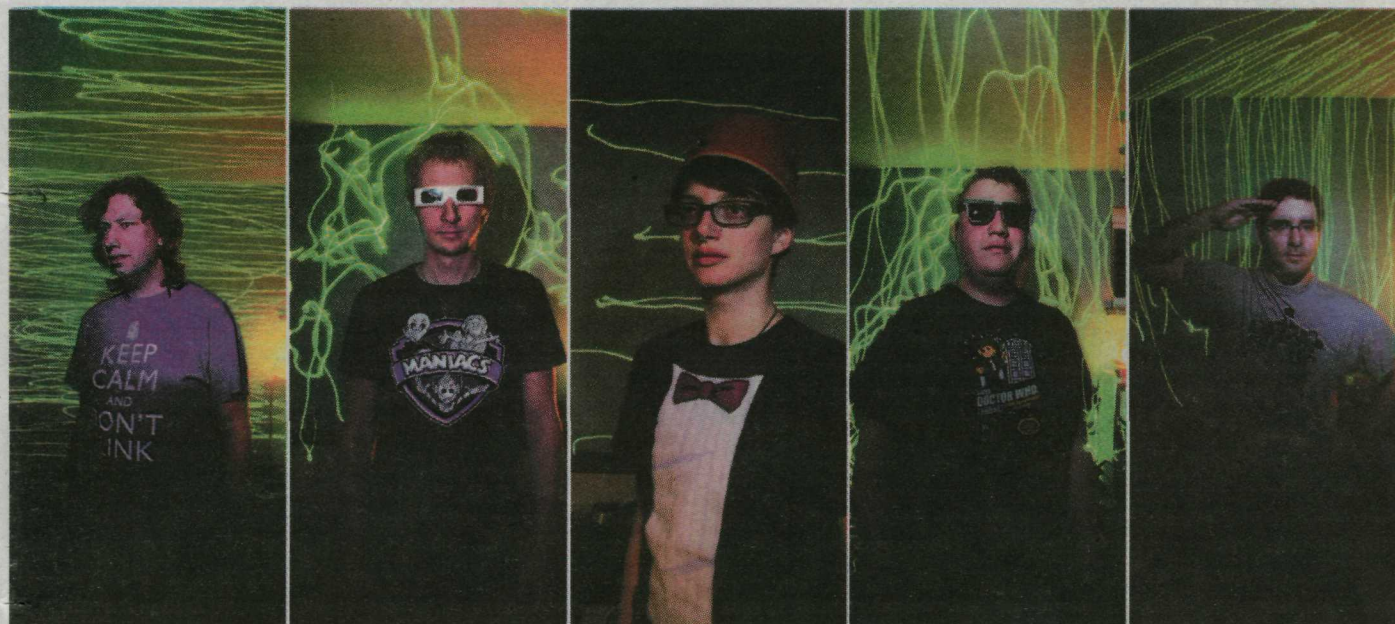
The paths that can lead a musician into nerd rock are many. Parry Gripp's pop-punk band Nerf Herder, which wrote and played the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* theme, takes its name from an insult Princess Leia spat at Han Solo ("Why you stuck-up, half-witted, scruffy-looking nerf herder!"). Wizard-rock bands such as Iowa's Ministry of Magic and California's Roonil Wazlib (the genre is also called "wrock") write songs about Harry Potter, as of course do Harry & the Potters, a Massachusetts group often credited with founding the genre in 2002. On "New Wizard Anthem" they sing, "You guys can forget about the Sorcerer's Stone / 'Cause we got the rock right here."

Other niche bands might pay tribute to Middle Earth or Mass Effect, often dressing as characters onstage. Trekkie group Il Troubadore (who call themselves "Indianapolis's 24th-century Klingon opera ensemble") perform in full-face alien makeup, and Tolkien-inspired Finnish heavy-metal band Battlelore (currently on hiatus) wear chain mail and elven cloaks to sing about the Lord of the Rings. There's even Twi-rock, in which teenage girls posting acoustic songs to YouTube channel the angst and sparkle of Stephenie Meyer's divisive *Twilight* saga. But today's vampires are yesterday's hobbits, and bands can end up short-lived if a certain fandom goes out of vogue.

It's surprising, then, that there aren't more songs about time-traveling blue police boxes. Beloved BBC science-fiction series *Doctor Who* has been around for 50 years, and on Saturday, November 23, it celebrates the golden anniversary of its very first broadcast with an 11-city simulcast of the new episode "The Day of the Doctor" (the local venues are Century 12 and CineArts 6 in Evanston and Cinemark at Seven Bridges in Wodridge). On Monday, November 25, an additional 300 or so U.S. theaters, including more than two dozen in Chicagoland, host their own screenings.

The show has had a cult audience for decades. The London-based Doctor Who Appreciation Society was founded in 1976, and the Doctor Who Fan Club of America popularized the term "Whovian" in the 80s. The 2005 reboot of the series rejuvenated and ex- ➔





Time Crash: Pedal-steel player Chris Rice, bassist Michael Fye, singer and guitarist Ronen Kohn, drummer Andy Rice, and wielder of the GuiTARDIS Dave Kitsberg TODD DIEDERICH

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panded that following, and today you can buy BBC-official sonic screwdrivers and Dalek salt and pepper shakers at any respectable comics shop. Look around on the el and you're likely to spot at least one TARDIS smartphone case. But despite its status as one of the longest-running shows on TV, this seminal sci-fi hit has inspired relatively little music making.

Chicago band Time Crash say they're the first Americans to play "Time Lord rock" (often shortened to "trock," by analogy with "wrock"). It's a plausible claim, considering how thoroughly the genre has been dominated by British and Australian acts during its short history. You could argue that trock began when the Timelords topped the UK singles chart in 1988 with "Doctorin' the Tardis," but that "band" was just a goofy, halfway cynical alter ego of the KLF, and never put out another song. It's more accurate to say that Time Crash follow in the footsteps of UK group Chameleon Circuit, who came up with the term "trock" in 2008 and take their name from the TARDIS's camouflage feature, which lets the ship blend in no matter where or when it ends up—in ancient Greece, for example, it might appear as a column. (The chameleon circuit on Doctor Who's vehicle of choice is broken, which is why the TARDIS always appears as an iconic but conspicuous police box.)

Time Crash's beginnings were so casual as to almost count as accidental. In 2011, Northwestern University theater graduate Ronen Kohn, who'd been busking and playing local shows, started taking breaks from working on a folk-rock solo album called *Cracks* to obsessively watch *Doctor Who*. Kohn began to won-

der how the show's storytelling could translate to lyrics. "I was thinking that my entire brain is full of *Doctor Who* right now, and if I write any song it's going to secretly be about *Doctor Who*," Kohn says. "So then I thought, Well, why does that have to be a secret?"

That June, Kohn posted a spur-of-the-moment Facebook status wondering if anyone else wanted to play rock songs about time travel: "Are any of my friends musicians who are also huge geeks? Say, for instance, Doctor Who fans?" Dave Kitsberg responded within hours, jumping in as lead guitarist; he soon brought along bassist Michael Fye, a former coworker at GameStop. (Kitsberg now manages a Radio Shack, and Fye works at the Land of Nod and the Music Industry Workshop. Kohn has a support job with a software company.)

Kitsberg didn't feel right playing space-centric songs on an ordinary earthbound guitar, though. He wanted a GuiTARDIS. Challenged with turning a terrible pun into a proper musical instrument, he approached his friend Chris Rice at Chicago-based Rice Custom Guitars. Rice had been building guitars with his dad, Rich, for more than 15 years, but he'd never modeled one after a police box. "How are we gonna do this so that it's not a gimmick guitar, so that it's a serious instrument that does justice to the music?" he remembers thinking.

Rice started watching the show to "capture the essence of the TARDIS," noting the box's subtle changes through five decades of screen time—and in short order he got hooked. Within days, he'd watched all the rebooted seasons and moved on to classic *Who*. He didn't just build Kitsberg a GuiTARDIS; he also joined up as Time Crash's pedal-steel guitarist. He

recruited his brother Andy, a manager at an Arlington Heights pawn shop, to play drums, and in June 2012—a little more than a year after that initial Facebook post—the band's current lineup finally took shape.

It takes a while to come up with a set's worth of songs, of course, but Time Crash had started writing material when Kohn and Kitsberg first met up, long before all five members were aboard; they made their live debut in September, just three months after the Rice brothers joined. Soon they were opening for fellow nerd rockers, including local videogame band Arc Impulse, at the Abbey Pub and the Elbo Room. Fans began showing up stage-side in bow ties and suspenders, a nod to the current Eleventh Doctor's dress sense.

Time Crash borrow a line from the Tenth Doctor to describe their live shows: a little wobbly-wobbly, a little timey-wimey. Instead of holding lighters in the air, fans wave sonic screwdrivers. The band often kick off their sets by quoting the Ninth Doctor's zombie-inspired episode, "The Empty Child," asking the crowd "Are you my mummy?" in ominous tones. Onstage, they pair novelty T-shirts with fezzes and long striped scarves that recall the Eleventh and Fourth Doctors, respectively.

Peter Capaldi of *The Thick of It* takes over as the Twelfth Doctor this upcoming season, so the show offers plenty of looks to imitate. Though multiple actors have played the Doctor, they're all incarnations of the same character, an alien from the planet Gallifrey who can "regenerate" in a new body when he suffers a mortal wound. "Regeneration in my case is a swift but volcanic experience, a sort of violent biological eruption, in which the

body cells are displaced, changed, renewed, and rearranged," the Sixth Doctor once explained. Time Crash touch on the theme of regeneration in several songs, and hope to bring it onstage by having every member dress as a different Doctor for a show.

So far Time Crash have only one recording, the EP *Little Amelia*, cut at Solid Sound in Hoffman Estates in July 2012 and released the following month. It includes punk rock and power ballads, often tongue-in-cheek but sometimes beautifully earnest. The lyrics of the title track are a heartfelt note to Amelia Pond, the Doctor's red-haired companion from 2010 till 2012, whose family disappeared into a crack in time in her bedroom wall. "The Last Human," by contrast, draws on *Doctor Who*'s campy, kitschy humor. Kohn sings from the point of view of Lady Cassandra, the final human, who lives five billion years in the future. Thanks to hundreds of extreme plastic surgeries, she's been reduced to a brain in a vat and a sort of stretched-out skin trampoline with a heavily made-up face. A cast of cronies follows her with spritz bottles to keep her skin supple. "It's true there are some who despise me," Cassandra sings. "Someday they'll all moisturize me."

Luckily for Time Crash, Chicago hosts a few Whovian happenings to nourish the local fandom. The Chicago Doctor Who Meetup screens a classic episode the third Wednesday of every month at Third Coast Comics in Edgewater. Gorilla Tango Theatre started a *Doctor Who* burlesque show called *Don't Blink* in February 2013. And since 2000 there's been a yearly *Doctor Who* convention, Chicago TARDIS, which this year falls on Thanksgiving weekend; it's at the Yorktown Center mall in Lombard, and featured guests include Peter Davison (the Fifth Doctor), Colin Baker (the Sixth Doctor), Paul McGann (the Eighth Doctor), and Freema Agyeman (Martha Jones, the Tenth Doctor's companion).

So far Time Crash have mostly played shows in bars, but they recently set a new goal: to connect with loyal Whovians by doing gigs at conventions. This spring they're booked to play Chicago's Chi-Fi geek convention and Detroit's Midwest Media Expo. At the same time, they want to reach out to nonfans too. "We've had multiple people at shows come up to us and say they've never seen an episode of *Doctor Who*, but now they want to because they saw us perform," says Fye.

"You always want to bring new people in," agrees Kohn. "That's the fun of fandoms. Getting everyone together in your happy fandom family and sharing what you love."

In pursuit of these new converts, Time Crash have begun to venture outside the nerd-rock bubble. In summer 2013 they went into battle—not against genocidal Daleks for the fate of the



planet, but against dozens of local bands for a spot onstage at the House of Blues for August's I AM Fest, aka the Independent Arts and Music Festival. The Elbo Room sponsors the four-round battle, and judges and audience feedback decide who moves forward. Competing bands played pop, folk, hip-hop, and more—there was even another nerd-rock project, a heavy-metal Mass Effect band called Geth Prime.

Singing about love, loss, and time travel, Time Crash won their bracket in the preliminaries and the semifinals. They lost in the finals—Phil Jacobson, the Rory Tyler Band, and Pirates!!! eventually played the fest—but the experience helped them feel like they'd begun to find their footing in the Chicago music scene. "To get that far with what we do—which a lot of people would see as a niche thing—is incredible," says Kohn.

Because casual listeners won't know Silurians (lizardlike humanoids from the dawn of time) from Sontarans (potato-headed space warriors), Time Crash often depend less on

record now, with their fingers crossed for an early 2014 release. Some of the album's tracks honor Doctor Who's past companions, among them Rose Tyler and Donna Noble, but Kohn prefers to write from the Doctor's point of view. The members haven't agreed on a title yet: *Nevermind the Daleks* is a leading candidate, but when Chris Rice suggested *Regeneration* during my interview with the band, it provoked a collective "Oooh!"

On Doctor Who's 50th birthday, Time Crash won't be joining the fun in Chicago—they're traveling to Brooklyn bar and self-described "Nerdvana" the Way Station for a daylong celebration of all things Gallifreyan. "It's our first show outside of Chicago," says Kohn. "I really don't know what to expect, but I think it's going to be awesome." The event includes a screening of the anniversary episode, comedy rap from Devo Spice, bluegrass covers of 80s hits by the DeLorean Sisters, and a grim look into the future from dystopian rockers the Sky Captains of Industry. "It's not as if I thought of [the anniver-



In this scene from "The Day of the Doctor," the Eleventh and Tenth Doctors prepare to test the efficacy of sonic screwdrivers against halberds. © BBC


familiarity with *Doctor Who* trivia than on the universal emotions the series evokes. Fye says "I Don't Want to Go" might be the saddest song he's ever played, trock or not. It takes its title from the last words of the Tenth Doctor, played by David Tennant, spoken moments before his regeneration—but listeners who know nothing about Time Lord life cycles can still connect to its themes of grief, loss, and rebirth.

"Even if you're not a *Doctor Who* fan, these are songs you can really get behind, because they're just great stories," says Chris Rice.

That approachability is paying off. A summer Kickstarter campaign to fund Time Crash's first full-length album brought in \$6,680 from 211 backers—well more than their \$5,000 goal. They're working on the

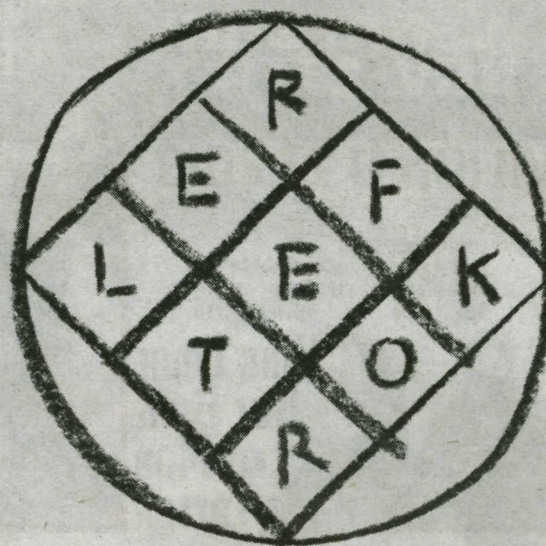
sary] when I conceived of the band, says Kohn. "But it turned out to be amazing timing."

Time Crash are already talking about a second album, before the first one's even finished. All fandom bands have to deal with the limitations of their source material, but Time Crash aren't worried about exhausting theirs. "It certainly helps that we have such great stories to draw from in the first place," says Kohn.

Not just great stories, but lots of them: with more than 700 episodes so far, plus comics, serialized novels, and more, *Doctor Who* offers entire galaxies of songwriting inspiration. Neither the band nor their Time Lord muse shows any sign of slowing down. "Fifty years from now," says Fye, "we'll be playing at the 100th-anniversary show." 

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