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Even before I get to Deitch Projects, SoHo's intimatingly

fashionable gallery-slash-performance space, I can feel something special is about to happen. It's an eerily warm, wet fall Friday night, and the din of thousands of voices echoes from blocks away. A queue of important-looking people, including celebrated stylist Grace Coddington and a few artists whose faces I can't quite place, file inside, past a table where a drink called Melancholic Tonic is being served. My friend and I try to pass the time by looking for Jack White, whose new wife, Karen Elson, is performing tonight; there seem to be several fedora-capped, long-haired decoys scattered throughout the room. Soon, though, we can't see much of anything. The gallery is rapidly filling up with people, very tall people, worming and squirming their way into every remaining inch of everyone else's personal space, all to get a glimpse of the Citizens Band, the amorphous, poly-disciplinary cabaret collective.

What's clear is that tonight's piece, *The Trepanning Opera* (the name refers to Bertolt Brecht's 1928 musical *The Threepenny Opera*), is a satire on the state of the American medical system—and that the toast of New York will apparently let nothing, not even the feet of innocent bystanders, get in the way of seeing it. What's less clear is who's doing what. A motley crew of elaborately costumed performers—young and old, black and white—are playing brassy instruments and dancing and hamming it up with abandon. Conjoined twins separate; a naive patient is seduced by her smarmy doctor; a whirling aerialist representing the plague swoops in and kills everyone. Elson, playing a sad white-haired moppet, has the most haunting, honeyed voice I think I've ever heard. And, ow, some guy just whacked me in the head with a beer bottle.

"I am so sorry about that," moans Sarah Sophie Flicker, a filmmaker, actress, and trapeze artist—and the woman Elson calls "the Zelda Fitzgerald of our day"—a few days later over tea in a nearby patisserie. I'm sitting with her and one of the group's other creative directors Adam Dugas, who both look every bit as anachronistically fabulous offstage as they do on (he wears

an ascot; she sports dark hot-rolled curls, a vintage nightgown, and preposterously long eyelashes). The two have just met with Jeffrey Deitch to discuss their next performance, a sort of greatest-hits revue, which will take place at Art Basel in Miami before a crowd of dealers, collectors, and sundry cultural influencers. It's quite a leap from the group's homespun start. "I was sitting around drinking with my friend Jorjee Douglas, the singer of Butcher Holler," Flicker recalls, "and we literally just said, hey, wouldn't it be great if we had a cabaret?" She ran into Dugas, a performance artist and old friend who was hosting a series of salons at Deitch's Brooklyn space with his boyfriend Casey Spooner of Fischerspooner, and he offered to screen a film of Flicker's at one of the events. One thing led to another, friends and other artist-musician types showed up for three quick rehearsals, and the group took the stage last November. "It was beyond free-form," Flicker says, "but we knew right away there was something magical about it." Adds Dugas: "Jeffrey happened to be there, and he came up to us and was going nuts."

Since then, the group's roster has revolved and evolved, with seasoned theater veterans pitching in ideas alongside avant-garde Brooklyn composers and downtown multi-hyphenates like Eugene Hutz and Melissa Auf Der Maur. Maggie Gyllenhaal joined in for a rendition of Radiohead's "We Suck Young Blood" at one show; Zaldy, the designer of Gwen Stefani's L.A.M.B. line and his own, helps out with the costumes. "One of our goals was to bring the tribes of New York together again," Dugas says. "Art can be so cliquish, and very white and youth-oriented."

Elson—who, until the Citizens Band came along, saw singing as "a secret hobby"—certainly seems to have found her calling. "Let's face it, the idea of a model doing anything interesting makes people suspicious," she says over the phone (she's left town to tour with the White Stripes). "I was terrified at first, but after the first song they couldn't get me off the bloody stage!" She is actively involved in the group's creative process; to research her role as a "lovesick albino," she consulted medieval medical textbooks, which, she is particularly excited to note, feature detailed illustrations of that affliction.

Each of the group's five shows has revolved around a politically charged theme—the Bush administration, religion, the Iraq war—and made a point of being un-self-consciously, un-ironically funny (picture a vampy ensemble belting out "Personal Jesus"). The core members write dialogue faithful



to the target time period of 1880-1920 ("my favorite period, aesthetically," Flicker explains) and cobble together a mélange of original songs, pop favorites, old standards, and obscure gems unearthed from Flicker's vast collection of vintage song books—that "hit on the points we're trying to make." Cabaret is, after all, historically rooted in social protest: Its practitioners in Weimar-era Berlin, beneath their louche glamour, used it as a forum to express suspicion over economic inequality and the growing influence of Nazism. "We'll find songs from, say, 1913 that are condemning the same things we're condemning now," explains Dugas. "That's the cyclical nature of humankind. We make the same mistakes over and over again."

And in an era when the most cogent news analysis comes courtesy of Jon Stewart, and pop music's political pundits are dead-serious types like Bono and Chris Martin, the Citizens

Band's uniquely exuberant brand of satire feels like much more than just another art-scenester vanity project. "The thing is, what we're doing is so *not* cool," Flicker says. "If everybody just stopped trying to be cool, we'd have so much to learn from each other." With that in mind, the band are planning to record their work, and hopefully make a film, to reach a wider audience. Though in truth, their shows have to be seen to be believed—even if it means enduring a bruise or beer stain or two. "Not to be pompous, but a lot of creativity these days is focused around negative attitudes," notes Elson. "Yes, we live in messed-up times, but so much out there is so dogmatic. The fact that we can ask, 'is this fair?' and express our opinions in a positive way—well, that's something worth celebrating."

The Citizens Band is performing on November 30 at Art Basel, Miami. For more information, see thecitizensband.net.