

ARENA



MUSIC
D6

D6 | Friday, January 25, 2013

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MUSIC

Taking Aim At the Mainstream



HOOKS WITHOUT EXCUSES The new album by Tegan and Sara features synthesizers and fist-pumping beats.

BY JOHN JURGENSEN

IT'S ONE OF THE MUSIC WORLD'S trickiest maneuvers. How do niche artists reach a wider audience while staying true to their sound and the core fans that supported them for years?

The indie-rock duo Tegan and Sara launched their career 14 years ago in Calgary, Alberta. Identical twins, the Quin sisters released six albums, steadily racking up respect and a comfortable living. They sold out clubs and theaters, and acquired thousands of followers who binge on concerts and catalog their onstage banter. But after a somewhat predictable response to their last album, released in 2009, they realized they were headed for a career cul-de-sac.

"I became very outspoken with the fact that I was not satisfied," Tegan says. "If my career

ended tomorrow, I would absolutely be proud of everything that we've done. But my career is not over tomorrow."

Now the sisters are trying to punch through a glass ceiling with an album of unabashed musical hooks. "Heartthrob," set for release Tuesday, departs from their guitar-driven sound and some of the stabbing vocals that had become a signature. Lead single "Closer" features a wash of synthesizers, a fist-pumping beat and such lyrics as "So let's make things physical, I won't treat you like you're oh so typical." The 32-year-olds say they wanted a wide-open sound similar to 1980s anthems by Cyndi Lauper and Madonna. A music video features the twins singing karaoke at a house party where revelers dance and play spin-the-bottle.

As the Quins expected, the new music has riled some of the Tegan and Sara faithful. Indeed,

other artists have been scarred by pop makeovers gone bad. In the 1990s, the brash singer-songwriter Liz Phair helped usher in the indie-rock era. A decade later, she reinvented herself with producers rooted in the world of Britney Spears, but she fell short of a commercial breakthrough and angered old fans in the process.

But industry boundaries were more rigid then. Tegan and Sara are making their run at the mainstream while the sound of pop music is in flux. In the last year, seemingly left-of-center acts like Gotye and the Lumineers have had huge hit songs. After releasing an album of baroque rock that was largely ignored, the band Fun (who are friends of Tegan and Sara's) enlisted an elite hip-hop producer, yielding hit songs such as "We Are Young" and earning six Grammy nominations.

In the indie world (a designation that has more to do with style and audience size than la-

bel affiliation), it's rare for artists to admit being motivated by anything other than artistic ambition. Chalk it up to modesty, reverse posturing or fear of failure, but indie songwriters hardly ever admit creating songs with a bigger audience in mind, let alone a sales figure.

Tegan and Sara do both. Frustrated with their apparent plateau—a veteran act that could expect to sell roughly 100,000 albums, do a tidy business on tour, and get ignored by commercial radio—they met with Rob Cavallo, the chairman of Warner Bros. Records, which put the Quins on its roster in 2007. During the course of a five-hour conversation, Mr. Cavallo talked them into a mental exercise: Imagine not just the sound of the songs they wanted to write, he said, but also the size of the venue they wanted to perform them in, and the reaction of the audience filling the place.

A week later, Tegan started writing "Love They Say," picturing an arena full of fans singing along with the refrain: "There's nothing love can't do." Most of the songs on "Heartthrob" were shaped by producer Greg Kurstin, known for his work with artists like Ke\$ha and Pink.

"The challenge was to write something more universal and simple. That doesn't mean dumb, but don't hide behind confusing poetry and metaphor," says Sara, referring to the more introspective, prickly lyrics on previous albums. To introduce some of the new songs to fans, the singers performed acoustic renditions in concert and ended shows with pep talks that credited the fans with getting them to this crossroads.

Indie songwriters hardly ever admit creating songs with a bigger audience in mind, let alone a sales figure. Tegan and Sara do both.

Mr. Cavallo also pressed them to picture a specific number of album sales. "He got us to admit that we wanted to sell a million," Tegan says, noting such a bold projection went against their nature as self-deprecating indie rockers, not to mention Canadians.

Sara says they're not chasing money. They've recouped the costs of making and marketing their albums. They know how many records and concert tickets they can expect to sell, and fix their budgets accordingly. They earn enough to maintain homes in two cities each (though Sara rents her New York apartment), but they don't splurge on high-end guitars or other frills, Tegan says: "We're always saving for the long term. I don't want to tour 250 days a year for the rest of my life."

Warner Bros. says "Closer," the single, has been picked up by big radio stations in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Diego and San Francisco that hadn't touched Tegan and Sara's music before. That's new terrain for the duo, whose career owed more to noncommercial stations and word-of-mouth. "We never cared about [commercial] radio before," Sara says, "but it's almost like the hormonal changes in women in their 30s who say, 'Oh, s—, I do want a kid.' Oh, s—, maybe I do want to be on the radio."

At the same time, some of the stations that have long supported them are so far opting out of the new sound. "It's too slick for us," says Bruce Warren, program director for WXPB-FM in Philadelphia, a station affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania where Tegan and Sara have been a mainstay. Though Mr. Warren says he personally likes "Closer," he says the label hasn't sent him other songs from the album that might work better in WXPB's mix, which ranges from folk to indie rock.

Tegan says that after years of worrying that they were wearing out their welcome, it was refreshing to realize that a whole swath of the music industry had never heard of them. Their promotional schedule is filled with firsts, such as performing a showcase for label executives in Miami and, this week, posing for a Vogue magazine photo shoot.