



**The Crest (above) and Sleeping in the Aviary feature Sienkowskis.**



Four years ago Michael began Eyebeams, the first band of his to make an impact on Madison music. Eyebeams was a melodic rock trio that included Nick Herro and Shaun Owens-Agase. The music was high on mood and showed flashes of angst.

Eyebeams and Sleeping in the Aviary were Sector Five labelmates in 2005. They played shows together, and Michael filled in as Sleeping in the Aviary's drummer at one of them. He hasn't stopped backing the indie-rock team of Elliott Kozel and Phil Mahlstadt ever since.

Meanwhile, when Sleeping in the Aviary rearranges itself and Michael takes on chief songwriting duties, the band is called WhatFor. This past May, WhatFor released its debut CD. The album revealed how much Michael's songwriting has changed since Eyebeams.

"I don't even like the Eyebeams songs anymore," says Michael. "They seem like exercises to me now. Now my focus is a lot more on lyrics. My writing is more traditional, and more of my songs are like oldies."

Songwriters that influence Michael tend to be literal, not abstract, in their craft. "It's like the John Lennon song 'Imagine,'" he says. "That song is so straightforward. It's well organized. The emotion is just right. It's powerful, and it's very beautiful."

And it's the kind of music Michael Sienkowski wants to make from here on out.

### ON THE BEATS

If his older brother is silly and his younger brother thoughtful, J.T. Sienkowski, like his birth order, is in between. He's DJ Skrabble, a stage name he gave himself because, yes, he's very into that word game. As a performer, Skrabble likes to put production behind all the spoken words that fly from the mouths of Jack Cracker and A.D. of the Crest.

Skrabble first learned how to DJ in high

school from a friend named Paul Hettiger, a.k.a. Jason Blare, another beat maker who began supporting the Crest in 2003. When Skrabble and brother Michael bought a house on East Washington Avenue together, Hettiger rented a room and moved in. "I just remember the two of them spending hours in the basement together going through albums and turning them into samples," recalls Michael.

Like his brothers, J.T. began college on an artistic track. He enrolled at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. "I just noticed I was really good at art in high school," says Skrabble. "It came really easy for me."

Unlike his brothers, J.T. doesn't write songs. He assembles sound. "With the Crest," says brother Michael, "he's on stage but he's not really up front. He likes that role and the collaboration that comes with it. There's a culture to it. His friend Paul is writing the hooks. And it's J.T.'s role to come up with the beats."

DJ Skrabble says his hip-hop productions have a split personality. "A lot of what I do is fun and lighthearted," he notes. "It's in the tradition of Prince Paul. But other stuff is really moody, which I see as a characteristic of Midwest hip-hop in general."

Despite his talent as a performer, Skrabble says he's reached a point where he's not all that interested in playing the part of a live DJ.

"I'm most interested in creating music," he says.

### THREE-PART HARMONY

The Sienkowskis have their separate musical careers, but that doesn't prevent them from collaborating to help each other out. Michael has written songs for the Crest. Skrabble has helped Ski with the rap productions behind his parodies.

That brings up a final point. After spending so much time noticing the differences that distinguish these three brothers, something else occurred to me.

Their collective balance is a harmony all its own.

Together, the Sienkowski brothers are one part funny, one part contemplative and one part practical. And all three are making music as a counterpoint to their everyday lives.

"Like everybody else, we've got to work," says Michael. "We've got to do stuff we don't like. But we have this creative outlet that gives us something else to enjoy about being alive." ♦

**The Crest**  
High Noon  
Saloon,  
Wednesday,  
Nov. 5, 9 pm

# Okobos Music Festival

SAT - OCTOBER 11  
RESCH CENTER - GREEN BAY

## BEN HARPER *and the* INNOCENT CRIMINALS



## DEATH CAB *for* CUTIE



FEATURING

## BEN FOLDS M. WARD INGRID MICHAELSON JEWEL

TICKETS ON SALE NOW  
Resch Center Box Office  
or [ticketstaronline.com](http://ticketstaronline.com)



Music Festival  
[okobosmusicfestival.com](http://okobosmusicfestival.com)