'The Next' Is Ready for 'Here and Now'

By HUGO LINDGREN

Last month the five members of Idlewild, a rock band from Scotland, were in Fargo, N.D. The official reason for their visit was to open for Pearl Jam at an indoor football stadium called the Fargo Dome, but they had another agenda also. As the 25-year-old singer Roddy Woomble put it, the band was hoping to find "normal people."

Idlewild had recently ended its own headlining tour, which included a packed house at Irving Plaza in Manhattan and several other strong turnouts. But Mr. Woomble could not help noticing that the crowds had a parochial quality. "They were like us, you know — freaks who probably care too much about music," he said. "It's a very comfortable environment for us, but you can fool yourself into thinking the whole world is like that."

On the strength of three critically acclaimed albums, a string of hits in Britain and an enthusiasm for wasting their youth in tour buses, the members of Idlewild have maneuvered themselves into the general proximity of American success. Like the other imported acts appearing with them tomorrow at the all-day Village Voice Third Annual Siren Music Festival at Coney Island — the Datsuns from New Zealand, Sahara Hotnights from Sweden, Hot Hot Heat from Canada and the Kills from England — they arrived in the United States with radiant confidence born of home-grown fame and faith that talent and hard work are all it takes to make it in America.

Which, it turns out, is not exactly true in the music business.

Before Idlewild's latest record, "The Remote Part," was released in the United States by Capitol this spring, the band and some of its contemporaries shared the tag of "the next Radiohead," though not because of musical similarities. Idlewild plays big, well-constructed songs that have clear antecedents in American indie rock of the 1980's and early 90's. It has not yet shown an interest in disassembling rock music and putting it back together.

But like Radiohead, Idlewild is both culturally literate and ambitious, and some critics felt that this rare combination might enable the band to slip into the fickle American mainstream. When "The Remote Part" met with stateside reviews as strong as those it received in Europe, Idlewild seemed poised to have its moment, like the one Coldplay had three years ago when its first American single, "Yellow," became an instant last-dance-at-the-prom classic.

Idlewild is still waiting. Capitol, which puts out Radiohead's records here as well as Coldplay's, elected not to spend the several hundred thousand dollars it takes to get a single on radio playlists and give it a shot at the charts. So while Radiohead and Coldplay have both broken into the ranks of normal people and solidified near-superstar status with popular new records, Idlewild is trying to do it the old-fashioned way — by touring. In the bigger cities and some college towns — places where the quotient of music freaks is high — the group does well. It's everywhere else in the great wide-open mallscape of the United States that it has problems.

"You start a rock band because you don't understand how business works and you don't want to understand," Mr. Woomble said. "But then you find yourself awake at night analyzing how Coldplay got so popular here."

And how, he neglected to add, his band has not.

From their earliest days at art school in Edinburgh, the members of Idlewild had a precocious charm, much of it from Mr. Woomble, who looks like a stylishly unkempt graduate student and can comfortably work Gertrude
Stein's name into a chorus. He is known to disappear after gigs and go home with . . . a book. The band even takes its name from a book: the peaceful meeting place in "Anne of Green Gables," a favorite of Mr. Woomble's. He also commented in his online tour diary recently about "how Pittsburgh was just like the Michael Chabon novels say it is."

Idlewild's first full-length record, "Hope Is Important," released in the United States in 2000, was practically a homage to Nirvana, but an inspired one. Rod Jones's crunching guitars were a perfect match for Colin Newton's explosive drumming, and Mr. Woomble sang as if trying to split the difference between being in a punk band and a church choir.

When "100 Broken Windows" came along in 2001, Idlewild had evolved: the Nirvana explosiveness was still there, but the tunes had the depth and richness of R.E.M. The sound of the two bands that bracket American indie rock were fused into one, and on the strength of this record, Idlewild became stars in Scotland, developed a cult following in England and made a reasonable dent in America.

"The Remote Part" adds the epic qualities of U2, making elaborate use of keyboards, strings, and multiple layers of guitars and vocals and inviting the octogenarian Scottish poet laureate, Edwin Morgan, to read on the last track. With this Idlewild had decided that "recording an album and playing live are not the same thing, and we've gotten past the point of having to pretend they are," as Mr. Woomble explained it, adding, "We can do more than just blast the guitars."

With its new record Idlewild hints at the kind of transition U2 made many years ago when Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois produced "The Unforgettable Fire." But the finely buffed studio polish of "The Remote Part" did not sit well with some of Idlewild's core fans. It also did not sit well with the core bass player, Bob Fairfoull, whose attendance became spotty during the recording and who later had a well-publicized drunken confrontation with Mr. Woomble after a gig in Amsterdam. Mr. Fairfoull's ensuing dismissal was "the hardest and most important thing we ever did," Mr. Woomble said, "because it meant we all finally agreed on how we were going to move forward."

Which included becoming a lot more popular. In Britain a handful of singles from "The Remote Part" reached the charts, including "You Held the World in Your Arms," which made the Top 10. Coldplay's singer, Chris Martin, declared Idlewild his favorite band and invited the members to open on a European tour, playing for spectacular, arena-size crowds. The German film director Wim Wenders made a video for the single "Live in a Hiding Place," in which he dressed the band up as cowboys. Momentum, it seemed, was building.

Then Idlewild arrived in the United States, starting with its own club tour. "It was a very weird experience," Mr. Jones, the lead guitarist, said. "We'd have 1,500 people at a show in New York, and two days later we'd be playing Sunday night in North Carolina and there would be maybe 100 people, counting us. I don't mind 100 people. We'll happily play if nobody shows up at all. But it's hard to get a sense of where you stand."

Without regular radio play, the only Americans who find out about Idlewild are those who believe in record reviews or listen to college radio, and these days such people are less tastemakers for the masses than citizens in their separate nation. Record-industry experts estimate that on critical buzz alone, a record can sell maybe 100,000 copies. The heavily praised "Lifted, or the Story Is in the Soil" by Bright Eyes, for example, has topped out at 90,000.

Idlewild, however, has never come close to that in the United States; "100 Broken Windows" sold about 35,000 copies, and barring a late spending spree by Capitol, "The Remote Part," which went gold in Britain, may not duplicate that. Meanwhile, Coldplay has all but cornered the power-ballad market; the band's "Rush of Blood to the Head" is climbing past two million.

Even if Capitol coughs up the radio money, Idlewild may have trouble picking a single. The song that could equal the prom appeal of Coldplay's "Yellow" is a ballad called "American English." But it's not representative of Idlewild's sound, and its refrain — "You've contracted American dream" — introduces a perhaps unwelcome political notion.
That night in Fargo, though, Idlewild got a very warm reception. The crowd was so pumped for Pearl Jam that they took their seats early, and so the Fargo Dome was almost two-thirds full when Idlewild went onstage. And in a 45-minute set it elevated the crowd's sentiments from polite indifference to genuine enthusiasm. When the band closed its set with a recorded track of Mr. Morgan, the poet laureate, reading in his thick Scottish burr over a crash of guitars, the crowd raising plastic cups of Bud Light to the unlikely combination of rock and poetry, it seemed as if Idlewild might have converted a few of Fargo's normal people into freaks.

Which put the band members in a good mood when they returned to the cinder-block cell that was their dressing room. "We have to be believers in the idea that if you're good enough, people will come around to you if you just keep at it," Mr. Woomble said, jumping onto a skateboard and trying to ride it with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

One of his bandmates offered an alternative strategy for achieving fame in America: Mr. Woomble should date a Hollywood actress, following the example of Chris Martin of Coldplay, who goes out with Gwyneth Paltrow. "It can't hurt," somebody suggested. "And she might have friends." Mr. Woomble demurred, saying, "I'm afraid I don't know enough about modern cinema." That was promptly rejected as a lame excuse.

A celebrity girlfriend might not care for his current lifestyle in any case. After the band members showered where the football players usually do and made sandwiches from a tray of wilted cold cuts, Idlewild and its crew of five piled into the bus that has been their motel on wheels for their three months in America and drove all night to St. Paul, where they woke up the next morning in a parking garage under a hockey arena. For now, this is the good life.