

ORA

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[MUSIC](#)

[INSTAGRAM](#)

[PHOTOS](#)

[EPK](#)

ORA started on a road trip from their small, Southwestern Colorado hometown to Denver to see a concert that had been postponed a year by COVID.

Three members of ORA— Annie Brooks (vocals, guitar), Stephen Sellers (bass/synth) and Cyle Talley (guitar)— had been friends since their early twenties. Brooks and Talley were acoustic guitar slinging singer/songwriters playing coffee shops and small cafes, releasing several albums each independently, often with Sellers accompanying their live shows on bass. As they hit their late twenties, both Brooks and Talley decided that their singer/songwriter days were through. Brooks began an ongoing career as an illustrator and designer. Sellers and Talley became teachers. It was about this time that Charles Newmyer (drums) befriended Brooks and quickly forged a close friendship with the other two.

It was Sellers who looked around on the drive to Denver and said, “Between the four of us, we have the makings of a band. Why haven’t we ever tried that?” There was a moment of silence, each of the four letting the idea settle on them in their own way. Newmyer grabbed his phone and played a song saying, “I’d want to sound like this...” and then Talley took a turn, Sellers and Brooks, each of them playing a rock and roll song, each speaking to a desire to be the sort of band that they’d yearned to see but never had in their hometown: something heavy, but unfailingly melodic; something driving, but capable of spaciousness and ambience; something that could soar, but could also kick some ass.

A seed had been planted, but it was Sellers who took the chance. On the drive home, he found an Epiphone Dot and a Fender Hot Rod deluxe amplifier for sale on Craig’s List and bought them for Brooks, the child of touring Christian folk musicians and a lifelong Martin adherent, who subsequently set about applying her acoustic chops to become electric chops. Newmyer dusted off the drum set that had been sitting in the corner of his basement, Talley had been, unbeknownst to the other three, fiddling with a fuzz pedal and a Jazzmaster in his spare time. They met a few weeks later in Newmyer’s basement, each having agreed to learn the Jim Sullivan song, “UFO”. A few weeks later, Sellers wrote a riff and chord progression and sent it to Brooks who would write lyrics to it and the band had their first song, “Extra Spectre”. Then, Brooks brought a few original songs and the four hashed them out, each adding little details, changes, and ideas. A democratic practice was born, a collaborative arrangement made— and they began asking friends to come by and hear what they were up to.

The feedback was encouraging.

By this time, early in the summer of 2022, they’d been rehearsing weekly for six months and had created eight songs. One, “Extra Spectre” by Sellers, with lyrics and melody by Brooks, and the remainder written by Brooks. It was time for a show. Partnering with Channel 37, a large metal fabrication shop with an open floor plan and lively acoustics, ORA began planning their debut show for October. Benefitting from the talents of photographer/videographer Jacob Brooks, ORA began filming promos and videos for the show, driving engagement and interest with a notoriously difficult and fickle local scene. The result? A fire code breaking show of 275 attendees for a band that had no recorded material to its name.

Since then, ORA has shared the stage with Colorado-based bands Heated Bones, Desert Child, Heavy Diamond Ring, and Desiderata; as well as Arizona-based Street Blues Family while continuing to record. Their single, “Going Gone” was self-recorded and produced, mixed by Newmyer and mastered by Josh Moorehead, and is characteristic of the ORA sound: hazy atmospherics, fuzzed-out menacing guitars, punishing and precise drumming, melodic and driving bass, and all stitched together by the singular singing voice of Brooks— warm and honey smooth, crackling at its edges with an otherworldly yearning that can best be described by a line from John Updike’s novel Rabbit, Run, “Somewhere behind all this... there’s something that wants me to find it.”

At their heart, ORA is a psychedelic desert rock band inspired in equal parts by bands like The Black Angels, Tinariwen, and Radiohead. Their hour long set of originals is energetic and ethereal, with each song holding space for a memorable hook as well as a chance for the audience to lose themselves in the sense that something larger holds them all together. Their live show is characterized by the raw, brutal force of Newmyer’s drumming, Brooks and Sellers’ melodicism, and Talley’s ability to conjure up vast soundscapes of reverb and delay.

ORA is booking for 2024, with further recordings to come