

# Monotonix thrives on unruly reputation: Israeli band keeps intensity at fever pitch

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Monotonix frontman Ami Shalev drinks a mysterious liquid from a show at a show. Courtesy, Tod Seelie, Drag City Records  
**Photograph by:** Tod Seelie

## Spotlight

Monotonix play the Distillery tonight at 1 a.m.; on Friday, they play Tubby Dog at 5 p.m. and Dicken's Pub at 1 a.m.

Eric Volmers

Frontman Ami Shalev doesn't attempt to hide his pride over Monotonix's track record for being shut down mid-performance by jittery authority figures.

It happened at Seattle's Bumbershoot after only 15 minutes. It happened three times at the South by Southwest festival. And, according to Shalev, it was a common enough occurrence during the act's early days in the relatively conservative clubs of Tel Aviv to have them branded as troublemakers in their home country.

In fact, the band's reputation as raucous, berserk live performers has reached such a fevered pitch that you'd be forgiven for assuming some of the tales are urban legends.

Did Shalev really keep on rocking after breaking his shoulder during a performance? Did a fan in Knoxville, Tenn., actually set his hair on fire with lighter fluid after coming across Monotonix's hidden stash? Does every show end with the audience picking up drummer Haggai Fershtman and his drum set for a hazardous round of crowd-surfing?

"This is true," says the wild-haired Shalev, in an interview from his home in Tel Aviv.

"A lot of shows have been cut. In Israel in the beginning they cut us all the time. We played in Bumbershoot and we got (in trouble) with the fire marshal. We just did our thing, but the crowd started doing their thing and the fire marshal couldn't deal with it and cut the power. And then we played South by Southwest and they cut us, something like three out of four times."

Needless to say, descriptive prose does not do these performances justice. The curious should check them out during their three performances this week at Sled Island. The less adventurous may want to stick to the numerous YouTube clips that capture Monotonix in their manic glory.

A typical show finds the 40-something Shalev — once a tank commander for the Israeli army — leading the band through a set of heavy metal-fused garage rock as a shirtless, hairy whirlwind of energy. Sporting unruly, shaggy hair, a Burton Cummings moustache and thick Israeli accent, he crowd surfs, often moons the audience and occasionally sets things on fire with the aforementioned lighter fluid. Shalev, guitarist Yonatan Gat and drummer Fershtman rarely set foot on a stage, preferring to be positioned on the floor amid their throbbing mob of fans.

This, coupled with tireless touring of the U.S. and Canada, has earned the band a reputation as one of the world's best live acts. Spin Magazine, in fact, called Monotonix "the most exciting band in rock 'n' roll," a heavy crown for a trio that has thus far only released one EP of recorded material.

"The first show we did in Israel was something like four years ago," says Shalev. "And from the beginning it was like this. We tried to get better and tried to improvise the show to interest ourselves and the crowd. But the vibe was there from the beginning. It's a reaction to our music. And that's how we played the first time: the energy and the idea."

Still, Shalev says the band has done a better job of capturing their live sound on a new disc, which is set to be released in September under New York's Drag City Records.

Recorded in San Francisco, *Where Were You When it Happened?* mines the energy of the live shows, Shalev says, offering an authentic snapshot of what the vocalist calls "energetic, simple, wild Israeli rock."

"We felt with the last EP, we didn't get a really good translation from the stage energy into the recording," he says. "This time we practised on the songs without playing them during shows. We kept it very fresh and natural and then we recorded it with the same energy that we've got in the live show. It's very simple, very energetic."

This simplicity extends to the lyrics, which find Shalev avoiding any hint of the prickly politics and strife that dominate his part of the world.

The eight songs, which include such less-than-cerebral titles as *Spit It In Your Face*, may not be dominated by his country's troubled history, but the singer says his heritage is referred to in a less-literal way.

"We have our own unique style," he says. "We come from Israel. In Israel, the way you play and write songs and sing, especially for me because English is not my first language, are different from the melodies and sound that American people write. We play on electric guitar and drums like American bands. But our songs are different because we come from a different culture."

". . . We don't avoid the fact that we're Israeli. But we don't deal with politics."

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