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Beckett soars solo after The Academy Is

By: *BY BRUCE INGRAM For Sun-Times Media*

William Beckett

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Raue Center, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake

\$20

(815) 356-9212; www.rauecenter.org

After co-founding the power pop band The Academy Is one year after graduating from Barrington High School in 2003, and cultivating a worldwide fan base with that group, singer/songwriter William Beckett has been working overtime as a solo artist.

While touring nonstop since The Academy Is parted ways in late 2011, Beckett has released three EPs, plus an album's worth of acoustic versions of those songs, and the brand new full-length CD "Genuine & Counterfeit." His fourth U.S. tour in less than two years includes a stop Nov. 15 at the Raue Center in Crystal Lake.

We caught up with Beckett for a quick chat about writing songs, working hard and new beginnings.

Q: As the front man for The Academy Is, people tend to think of you first as a performer. But you're a prolific songwriter as well. Did you ever think of yourself as a writer primarily?

A: I've always been a performer. (Laughs) Once at a summer camp, when I was around 6 years old, I built a stage out of cardboard blocks and sang "Daughter" by Pearl Jam a cappella in front of everyone. I've never been afraid of the spotlight.

That became something different, though, when I started writing my own songs and performing them for my friends. Seeing something I'd created from scratch have an effect on people in a positive way — that's when I was hooked. Though it's true that when I started writing songs in my sophomore year it was really out of necessity. So much is happening at that time in your life that's new. Songwriting was my therapy and it kept me out of trouble.

Q: What were your early influences?

A: My mom was really into '80s pop and New Wave — the Cure and Duran Duran, New Order. And my dad was into early-'90s rock — Stone Temple Pilots, Pearl Jam. So they were both influences. Then I really got into Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd later in high school. But my friends and I were

also really into the local underground rock movement. That's when I started playing acoustic shows with Fall Out Boy and my friends in other bands.

Q: Why do you think The Academy Is was so successful?

A: It comes down to the songs, I think. We took pride in our ability to write songs that clicked with people. That's what I've been going for as a solo artist, also. I think the song is the most important thing. It's not the only thing, obviously. The way you perform it is important. But for me it's mostly about what you're saying, the stories you're telling, the side of yourself you're sharing with people.

We also worked extremely hard. Mike Carden [The Academy Is co-founder] and I both come from hard-working families and that work ethic helped us get established. We would spend more than 300 days each year on the road. And that made us a better band — and better writers.

Q: The group had a good long run, but what led you to part company?

A: I think it was just time for us to move on, for lots of reasons. We were in a situation with our label, for one thing, that screwed us up in a lot of ways. And our personal relationships were getting more and more distant.

For me, it was important to honor what we did accomplish and leave that on a high note as opposed to dragging it out and being unhappy with it. Now, as I move on to new things, I'm able to look back and remember all those times that were really great for us.

Q: Speaking of new things, you've been extremely productive since you began your solo career. Are you feeling newly energized?

A: Definitely newly energized. I've really been able to embrace my own instincts as a songwriter and a performer without having to second-guess myself or consider other people. That's been really good for me because I was starting to feel a lack of confidence toward the end of The Academy. I felt I wasn't saying what I should be saying, wasn't able to tell the whole story. And for me, that's what it's all about.