

HMM

MUSIC FOR GOOD
MAY 2014

KUBLAI KHAN
PEACE, LOVE AND ENERGY

NEEDTOBREATHE
STRIPPING DOWN

WHITECHAPEL
RELIGION,
DEATHCORE AND
TENNESSEE



THIS IS
MISS MAY I
WITH
TEETH

A FEAST FOR KINGS
PLANS THEIR
ATTACK

THE NOMADIC LIFE OF COMRADES

#178 SINCE 1985
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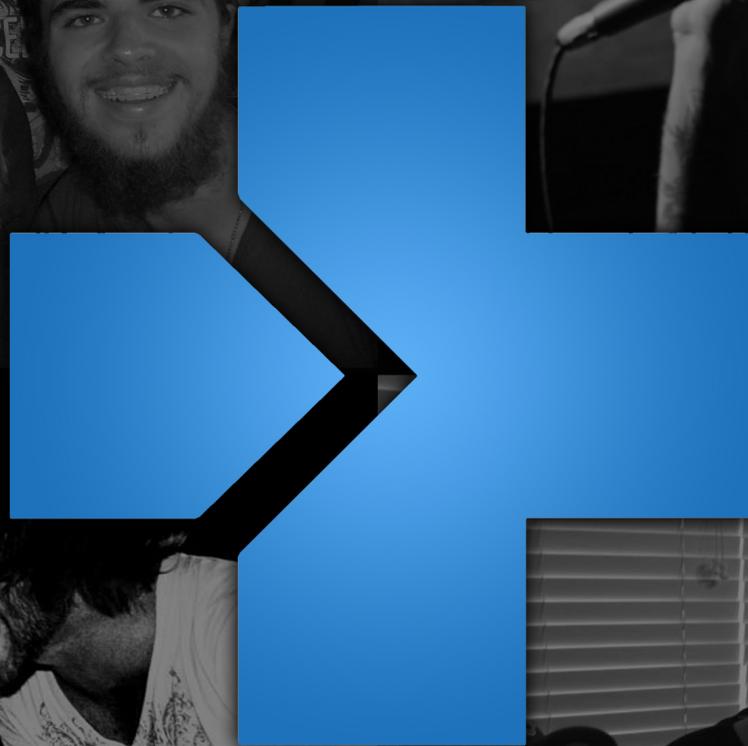


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BY JUSTIN MABEE

“When I’m 30 and I go to a bar and let people know what band I was in, I want them to still think it’s cool.”

— LEVI BENTON,
VOCALIST FOR MISS MAY I

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Photo by Julie Worsham

Pioneers of bigotry

I hope Donald Sterling goes down in history with George Wallace. They're pioneer bigots, guys with enough stupidity and brass to unabashedly dismiss entire groups of people. At least most of modern day has gotten hip to racism being a bad thing, at least in theory and at least with the understanding you shouldn't say it out loud. I suppose that's best described as a lateral move, most likely forcing latent feelings or condemning the ignorant to their own communities, but it doesn't actually get rid of racism. ¶ As a human being, it's your natural right to like or dislike things based on color. But eventually, we realize the purpose of color. In fact, we educate ourselves and grow to learn that a lot of other things we previously dismissed also have a lot of purpose. The dark used to scare you, and now Versace blackout linens cost \$305 at Pottery Barn. ¶ From a young age, every kid knows they look differently, but kids make one important distinction in their lines of questioning. When a white girl ask a black boy why he or she doesn't look the same, the same girl is also asking the same question to a white boy. It's how they learn their environment. We all learned a stove was hot at some point. ¶ But, thank God, He outthinks all of us. He gave us malleable brains, and in a natural cause-and-effect learned by the brain, racism sown does not reap love. Connection does. (And usually, it's in person.) Separation engenders separation and creates hierarchy. At the end of the day, if there is one meal and two groups of people, who gets to eat? ¶ I loved reading Rob Houston's interview with Kublai Khan's vocalist, Matthew Honeycutt, starting on page 46. He's not a believer, but his comments about Christians, racism, bigotry, separatism and respect are spot on. It was fascinating to read about his definition of love, and I think you'll find it all fascinating, too. At the very least, it will provide you with a viewpoint to chew on. ¶ With your attitude, Matthew, you can play any of my shows, any time.

For believers, this answer is "whomever is at the end of the line," and usually that's not us.

—DAVID STAGG, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
DSTAGG@HMMAGAZINE.COM

Currently Spinning at HM



Comrades *Safekeeper*

Fantastic instrumentals spotted with beautiful vocals and painful screams. Always on tour.



Miss May I *Rise of the Lion*

As Miss May I turns the corner in their musical career, this puts it solidly on the metal track. I'm in.



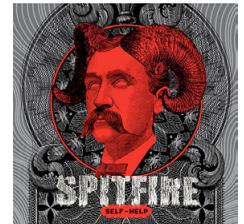
Being as an Ocean *How We Both Wondrously Perish*

A much-anticipated release that lives up to the hype.



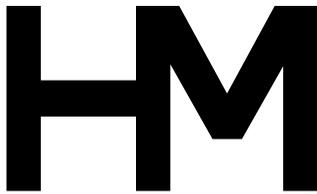
Chromeo *White Women*

The trendsetters in dance jams don't often miss.



Spitfire *Self-Help*

Still one of my favorite records.



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EDITOR IN CHIEF / CEO David Stagg
MANAGING EDITOR Collin Simula
DIRECTOR OF ADVERTISING Nathan Key
nathankey@hmmagazine.com

STAFF WRITERS Sean Huncherick,
Justin Mabee,
Doug Van Pelt

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Chelc Eaves,
Matt Francis,
Jordan Gonzalez

STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Brooke Long
COVER PHOTO Travis Shinn

SPECIAL PROJECTS Rob Houston

MAILING ADDRESS 5210 Canal St.
Houston, TX 77011

LETTERS letters@hmmagazine.com
CUSTOMER SERVICE service@hmmagazine.com
EDITORIAL editorial@hmmagazine.com
SUBMISSIONS bands@hmmagazine.com

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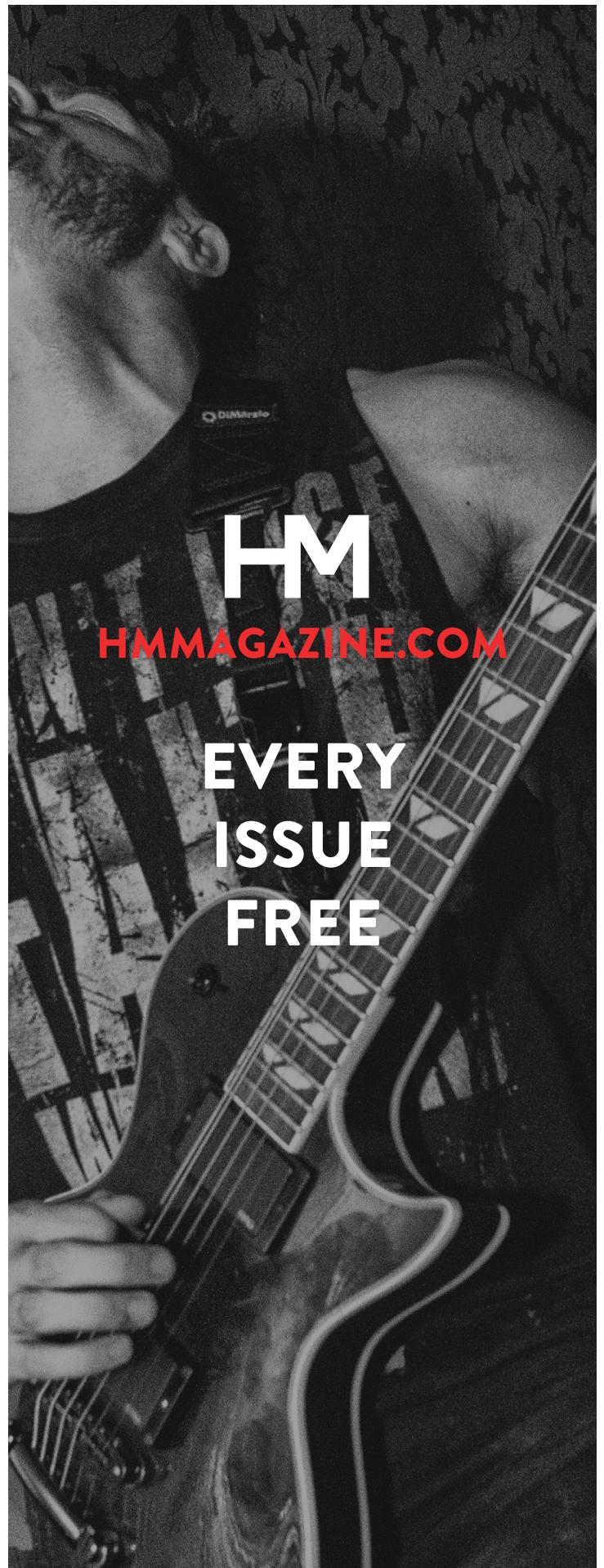


MONSTER
ENERGY

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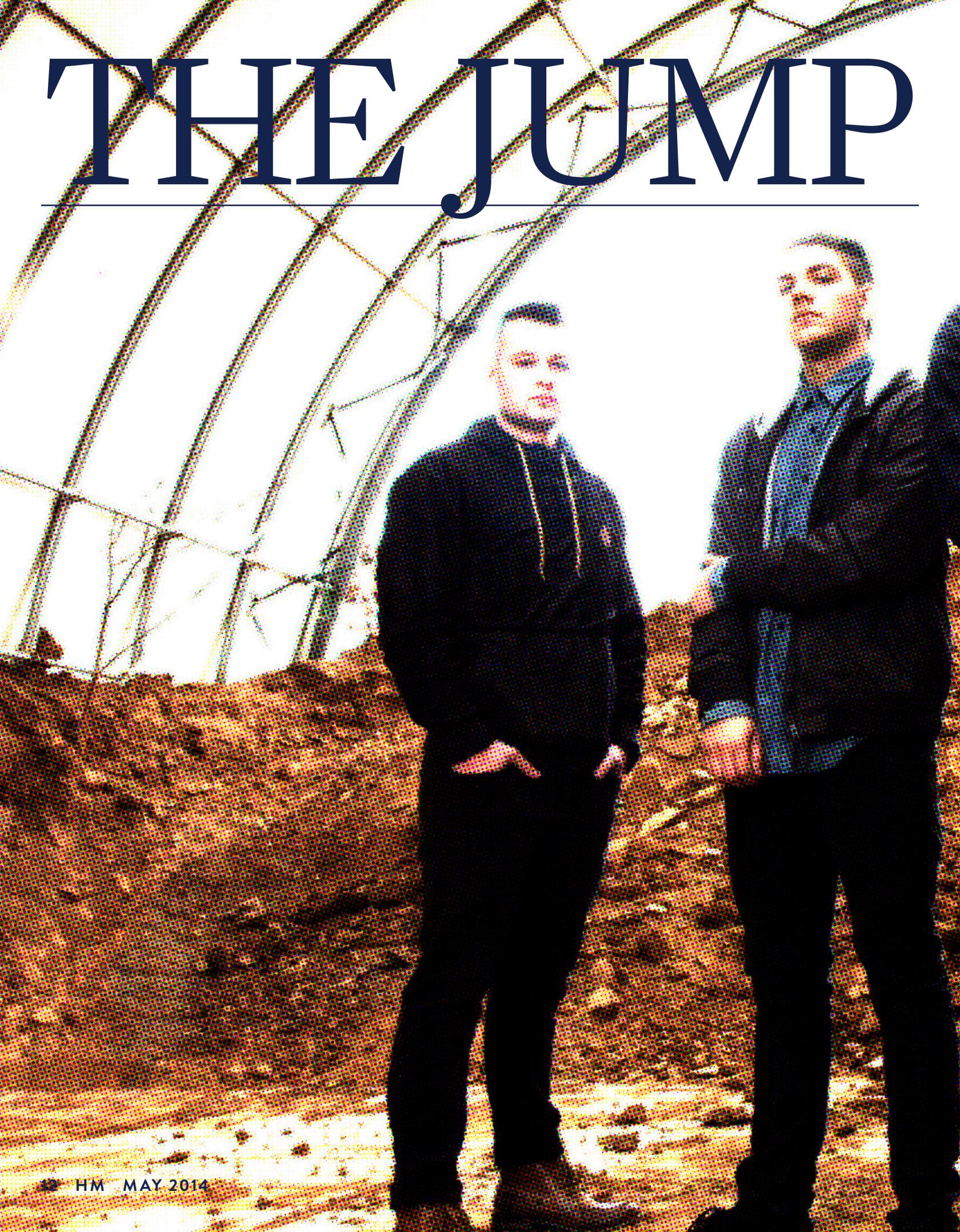
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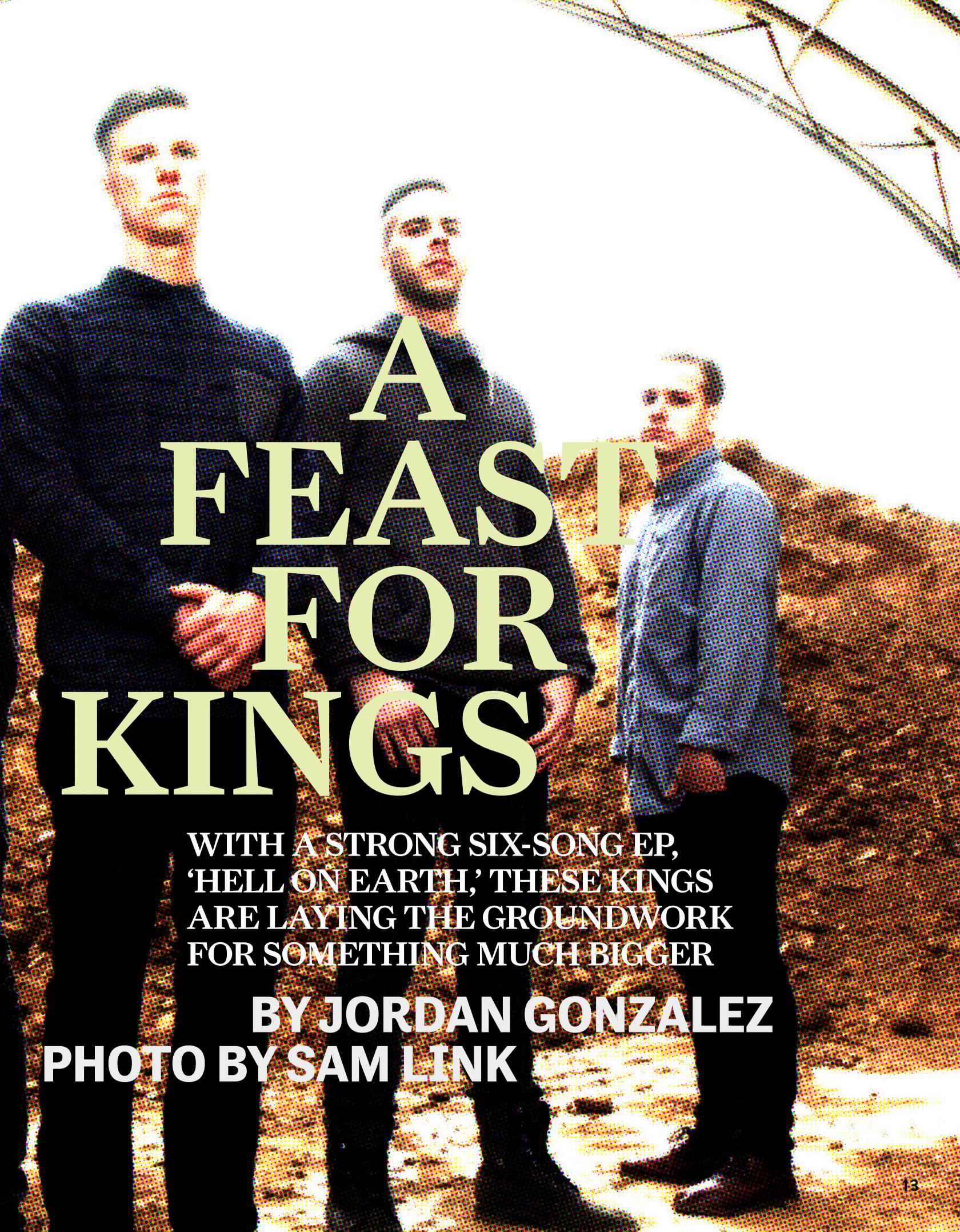
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THE JUMP





A FEAST FOR KINGS

WITH A STRONG SIX-SONG EP,
'HELL ON EARTH,' THESE KINGS
ARE LAYING THE GROUNDWORK
FOR SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER

BY JORDAN GONZALEZ
PHOTO BY SAM LINK

It's not uncommon for band members to be close-knit and have a great dynamic. After all, they usually came together for a common cause due to similar interests. Then, there is the fact that they literally live together, 24/7, as they practice, write, travel and perform. For A Feast For Kings, the progressive-metal band based out of Kentucky, they are an excellent example of that lucky set of people. Every Thursday when they're at home, they have a standing dinner date at drummer Carson Butcher's house. "We get together and we eat and we talk about future goals, plans and updates to the band," Butcher said. "And we sit around and pray stuff out. (It's our) kind of fellowship. It's a cool thing to do."

Although fringe genres such as rap and metal are much more accepted in social and spiritual cliques now, it's probably not every day a pastor and his wife invite his kid and his metal band over for a weekly dinner. But with a dynamic and a testimony like the guys in A Feast For Kings have, it fits into place.

HM Magazine had the opportunity to catch up with three of the band's five members to discuss their beginnings and what their

goals are for their future.

Thursday night dinners might have to wait.

Let's start from the beginning, then, so I can get to know you guys. Walk me through how the band started.

Butcher: I was a junior in high school. I had just went to my first metal show in a small town called Trimble County, Kentucky. There was a thing called Spring Breakdown, and it was this tiny, little... I wouldn't even call it a festival. It was a tiny little festival that local bands do.

I had heard about this stuff before, and I had actually never been, so I went with a couple of friends. I thought it was really cool. I came back and this one day, out of the blue, I was like, "I want to start one of those bands."

Actually, the guys in A Feast For Kings with me, a few of us were like, "We could write music like that," so we started from there. I'll let some of these other guys explain (that) to you. I consider these guys as pretty much original members. Would you like to know a little bit more about how they

came into play? They actually didn't even live here with me.

Carson, you said you went to that Spring Breakdown mini-festival and that got you into metal. If you want to clarify for me, the members of the band right now, are they your friends from high school, or did you meet when you started the band?

Butcher: Actually, the bass player — his name is Jamie King — and he went to high school with me. We knew each other, but we weren't super-close friends. His band was the first band that I saw there. He was in a band called Give Me Clarity, just a local band.

I walked in and saw him play and I thought that was really cool. He didn't end up joining A Feast For Kings until a couple of years later. These guys that I have with me — Seth and Eric — they joined a little bit after we had started.

Guitarist Seth Weigand: Basically, I met Carson at a church camp in Illinois. It's something both of our youth groups had gone to every year. We'd go back and see

each other and connect with each other, talk and keep in touch afterwards, year after year. I started going there when I was 12. They started going there probably when they were 14.

I'm from Illinois. I ended up joining the Air Force. Texas for training, got sent to Ohio for my active duty service. It turns out Ohio was (only two hours from) Kentucky where these guys live. Keeping in touch with him, I wanted to connect with someone because I was far away from home and didn't have any close friends.

I wanted to hang out with them and see what life was like up there in Kentucky. I made some plans to meet them in July 2010. I brought my guitar down there to jam or mess around or whatever. No talk about a band or anything.

On the way home that Sunday, they called me up and they asked me if I wanted to start a band with them. This is before it was called A Feast For Kings. It really didn't have much of a name before that. We didn't know what to call it.

That's where I came into play. I ended up com-

ing down every weekend after that to visit with them, go to church and practice. I got out of the military last year, and I moved down here. I live right down the street from Carson and Eric.

Eric, while I have you here, I also want to know what a few of your favorite bands are or singers, if you just want to say yours and some of your influences.

Gentry: Currently, I listen to a lot of Architects, Bring Me the Horizon and North Plains. I'm really excited to hear Betraying the Martyrs' new album. I listened to their old album. That's most of the metal I listen to, but I've got a pretty good mix of all kinds of music, not just metal.

Did you always like metal growing up, or is that something you got into later?

Gentry: It's something I really got into later, you could say. I don't know. When I was in middle school, I heard Underoath and stuff like that. It caught my attention, but really what got me going was I went to the music store one day and

We picked these topics — depression, addiction, anger — because they can make your life seem like a hell on earth. It makes you feel like you can't get through the day. We wanted to reach out to people on that level.

— A FEAST FOR KINGS
VOCALIST ERIC GENTRY

I bought August Burns Red's *Messengers*. I got The Devil Wears Prada's *With Roots Above and Branches Below*. Those are the two albums that really got me started.

Those are some of the classics, for sure.

Gentry: I'm surprised that (August Burns Red) CD still even works. I grew up on that (*laughs*). Mainly, for some reason, the radio in my truck had an older system, so I listened to it probably enough times to burn it out.

Butcher: I really like the new Architects album. I thought that was incredible. I really, really like North Plains' new album. That was probably my favorite release of the last year.

Growing up, the first thing I ever heard, pretty much like every other kid, was Underoath. Those guys pretty much became heroes to me. That was what got me started into metal.

There are so many trends and things kids do they think is cool to do (because they're in a band, but you can always go back and put in *Define the Great Line* or *They're Only Chasing Safety*. Listen

to Underoath and it's still just as cool as when you were 14 or 15.

Weigand: Tony Bonette from As Cities Burn was my — I guess you would say — idol. I don't like using that word, but anything he did, I wanted to do. That's my all time, most influential band. Even more than Underoath.

Any favorite album by them?

Weigand: *Son, I Loved You at Your Darkest*, the first one is my favorite one. That's the heavy one.

I saw you call A Feast for Kings progressive metal. Is that what you still consider

yourself?

Weigand: It's hard for us to even generalize our music. When you think about who we sound like, I can't honestly give you an answer. We like to create heavy music, sometimes melodic. We like to mix a lot of those things together.

I guess you would say progressive metal. It's constantly changing. It's different. I don't know how to explain it, really. That's the thing. It's hard to explain why you call it progressive metal.

Butcher: When we went into the studio to record this EP, our mindset wasn't on a specific genre or even a specific sound. Honestly, we

thought, "What can we do that we are going to like?" What can we give anyone that likes this genre of music — whether that's deathcore, hardcore, metal, metalcore, progressive metal, melodic — that might be a little heavier than rock (they would like)?" We really took a lot of time. I think we, as a band, really achieved that. There is literally something on this EP for everyone that likes every style.

We wanted something that kids that might not listen to this certain style, don't like that, or this part over here, they like that, but it might not be as much as this. It's stuff that everybody could

get into, so that was a big thing going into the studio.

Let's talk about what your goals are with the band. Do you guys have a specific goal in mind right now, or are you just riding it out?

Butcher: Obviously every band — whether they know what it takes or what it entails — wants to tour the world. That's every band's dream; that's definitely our dream. We are a Christian band, and not only a Christian band, but we are a band full of Christians. It's both. I'll let Eric get into lyrically in a second.

I'm being gracious of how to put these, but we're not as in your face when it comes to preaching. No disrespect to For Today — I absolutely love those guys and really respect what they do; they're a big influence — but we're not going to preach at you. We might not say the name of Jesus 30 times in our songs, but all our songs are positive and uplifting.

The EP name is *Hell on Earth*. We dug into how to overcome hell on earth through Christ. I'll let Eric explain more on the

I didn't really know what to call it. I saw feast and I saw kings and I was like, 'I guess that will work.' Unfortunately, there's not any giant, cool, Parkway Drive, growing-up-on-a-street story behind it. It has done good for us, though.

— A FEAST FOR KINGS DRUMMER CARSON BUTCHER

lyrical side.

Gentry: We had a six-song EP and we redid one of our older singles because it actually fit into the theme of what we were trying to do with *Hell on Earth*. We picked these topics — depression, addiction, anger — because they can make your life seem like a hell on earth. It makes you feel like you can't get through the day. We wanted to reach out to people on a personal level.

You can write songs about anything you want. These are things that people are going to (face) every single day, so why not try and influence (the world) in a positive way? That's what we wanted to do. We (wrote about) scenarios and more heartfelt things people could connect to. That was our main goal: connecting with the hearts of people who are going through stuff we have been through. Yeah, we're Christians, but we're not perfect people. We struggle, too. That's part of it. If we've been through it

and we overcame it, why not try to help other people do the same? That was our main goal lyrically through the whole EP.

Eric, are you the writer, or do you guys share the writing duties?

Gentry: Me and Seth, and actually Jamie, our bass player now, he (contributed) as well. We all pretty much throw ideas together.

Weigand: One thing I wanted to add to was the part about our goals for this EP as a Christian band. A lot of Christian bands will say they want to save or find the lost. That's a huge goal, but another thing we want to do is provide positive music for Christians who listen to heavy music.

There are not many of them out there. Me, I'm a Christian and I love listening to heavy music, but there are a lot of negative bands out there. We even named a few earlier, unfortunately. ... That's a huge goal for us, to provide that for Christians and

non-Christians, people who need to hear some positive stuff. Reach out to as many people as we can, lost and Christian people.

What about touring? Where are you going and where have you been?

Butcher: We really haven't done a whole lot of touring. We've done a lot of super-small weekend runs. We've done some festivals and stuff like that. ... Basically, the DIY tours a lot of the independent bands are doing, that's not something we've focused a lot more on. We've focused a lot more on our album and getting that exactly the way we want it. That way, when it comes time to start doing full U.S. tours — and even in the future overseas and stuff like that — it could be on a greater level.

I'm not saying we are so amazing our first tours are going to be ginormous overseas tours. The way we've planned, (we've) set ourselves up for a nation-

al touring circuit, instead of hitting a lot of the DIY tours with a lot of independent bands.

What inspired the name, A Feast for Kings?

Butcher: Unfortunately there's no cool story on that. Going back to when I started the band when I was a junior in high school, I was in English class — it was right when I decided I really wanted to (be in) a band — for some reason, I thought the first thing I should do is come up with a name. I was thinking of different names, and thought of a lot of really stupid things, things that might have been popular back then.

I didn't really know what to call it. I saw feast and I saw kings and I was like, "A Feast for Kings, well, I guess that will work. We'll see what they think about that." Everybody liked it and was like, "Yeah, all right. Let's do it." Unfortunately, there's not any giant, cool, Parkway Drive, growing-up-on-a-street story

behind that. It's just whatever. It has done good for us, though.

Gentry: It has been our name the whole time.

Butcher: It's always been our name. We've always been one band. That's the cool thing. A lot of bands might keep the same members, but they've been through 50,000 names, 10,000 stages.

A lot of bands actually don't have that.

Butcher: That's the thing.

Do you guys watch any TV shows? Are you into any movies or anything lately that you've been paying attention to?

Butcher: Yeah, we've been going crazy over the new "Workaholics." This new season is, like, the funniest stuff we've ever seen. We all get really excited when we get to get together and watch that.

I personally have been watching a lot of "The Wonder Years" lately. I don't know why. ... I kind

of enjoy it; It's not even that great.

I'm not sure what that is. Is that a new or an older show?

Butcher: "The Wonder Years" is a super old show. It was made in 1988. Eric's favorite show is "That '70s Show." I would probably have to agree with that. That was one of my favorites.

Gentry: When we watch TV, it's football.

Butcher: We all like to watch football a lot.

Since you've started the band, have you learned anything you can share that has been spiritual? What lessons have you learned? What has God been teaching you in the past few years?

Butcher: For me, over the past three years, (it has been learning to) be humble. Not being prideful, basically. I struggled a lot with being cocky. I was that football player, that jock guy in high school. I was a nice guy, but sometimes I might act like I was better than

someone, or act like this or that.

When I started this band, even though we were pretty much terrible for two-and-a-half years, it was still something. I still acted like I was really cool, all big and bad because I had this band. Reality check, basically, God worked on me and reminded me this is a gift. It's something I get to use to tell people, to help people out and (explain what God has) done in my life. Even though I might not be the most amazing metal drummer in the world, I am still blessed enough to be able to travel around, hang out with kids and play every night. That's something that's really cool.

Weigand: I'm trying to think of things I've struggled with in the past few years. I guess I've struggled to be the best Christian I could be, always.

I grew up in church. I think the difference between somebody who grows up in church and somebody who doesn't is being able to appreciate God and His creation, all

that he has done for us. Sometimes you can take it for granted when you've never really seen the other side of it.

One thing that I've learned in the past few years, getting out of the house and stuff, is to slow down and appreciate everything God has done for me in my life already.

I'm really thankful for Him. I can step outside and look around. I really appreciate God more now than I ever did in high school. Or growing up, really. I can look around and be overwhelmed by the things He can do. Even seeing this band, seeing where it has provided for us and all the people he's brought into our path to make it happen, it's really an overwhelming thing.

(Sometimes), things would look bad or something bad would happen. Then it ends up with God turning it into something even greater. Every time. Something that looked bad in the short term actually ended up being better in the long term.

I'm really thankful

God has done that for us. That's one of the big things on my heart right now. That's what I'm going to go with there.

Gentry: There are a lot of things we've been through, as these guys have mentioned, (but) one thing I dealt with is keeping in tune with God, keeping my heart towards God.

A little background — like Seth said — he has grown up in church. I have grown up in church. My dad has been a pastor my whole life. Being around that, I've always known the right thing to do. I've always known what's there for me.

Having it there, like Seth said, you don't really see the other side. Sometimes you get rebellious and you do things you know are not right. It always is nice to have a firm foundation to come back to, keeping you in tune, keeping you from falling away from God. That's pretty self-explanatory.

Another thing: keeping with the power of prayer, I've learned — once you

surrender your problems, whatever you're facing, to God and really believe in Him for things to come through — that's when things happen. I've seen it — time and time again — through the situations we've been through that are not right, but we gave Him our full trust. Some of these situations, we leave unscarred. It's all about keeping focus, keeping strong in prayers, and keeping that going.

Aside from that, I joined the band as the bass player and now I'm the lead vocalist. Making that step was crazy for me because I'm not really an outgoing-type-of person. I'm laid back. I analyze things from afar. Being on stage and (getting) to connect with the crowd — it's cool to be able to stretch myself like that. It's a whole new thing for me, but I love every bit of it. I know God's helping me grow in that area a lot, giving me the confidence and the will to want to do that.

†

Gonzalez is a Contributing Writer to HM.



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Sixty-four minutes

My social obligation is requiring my attention for just over an hour. Incessant watch-checking, and I'm back in high school math class, staring at the clock, watching the second hand ache and lurch in some elongated black-hole time trap. *Okay Matt, don't look at the clock. Resist the urge. Go back to doodling. Come on — that corner of your paper isn't covered in graffiti. Just don't. Look. At. The clock. It must have been 10 minutes. At least! I'll guess seven. To be safe. Okay, have a looksee... Forty-five seconds?! I'm a mental claustrophobe, here, a social inmate. Sweet, sweet escape — it's coming. Soon. I'll get my mind back in some*

uninhibited fashion, like letting air out of a balloon.

It never gets old, the final bell releasing the prisoners from their cells, doors flung wide. Then, everyday like clockwork, comes an operating decision: What song will kick off my drive home?

I could go with a classic. Something huge — a bombastic sing-a-long. “Born to Run.” “Baba O’Reilly.” Something that towers the rock escapism. I could go with energy, a song that approximates my highway acceleration (which, unfortunately, I-264 keeps at a measly 55 mph). Something trashy — early punk? Husker Du, the Replacements, or Johnny Thunder — cagey

youth that values power over substance. I could take a nostalgic trip, dive head-first into my first favorite songs, something from the likes of Value Pac or maybe “We are Tomorrow” from Bleach and take the gut-punch of feeling “Seventeen Again.”¹

To accommodate all singular dimensions, I slide into my front seat and quickly roll to the Ls on my playlist. Something that fits a classic, nostalgic turn — aged but still breathing; high octane, with crunchy guitars and generous tempo; a little youth with a dab foresight — something thrilling, something fresh and novel through rediscovery.

Luxury’s *The Latest and Greatest*.

With the volume cranked on my car’s stereo, I say a quick “thank you” for the physical volume knob on the system, literally turning up the volume in a way that can’t be replicated by a mute-to-30-digital-volume display. Guitar. Drums. Cold night air and bliss.

Luxury is a complex band to me. My early neglect led to a rediscovery some 15 years later. In their initial active years, I failed to grasp Luxury as a worthy band. But even in this neglect, I always thought I should.

To explain: I tried — yes, truly tried — to absorb Luxury in the early 2000s, but had mostly forgotten about them until recently; I saw an online review praising their craft in a stumble-upon moment. They were always a band I thought I needed to

like, but could never put in the same breath as MxPx, Joe Christmas, Danielson, Plankeye or Ghoti Hook — varied bands of numerous genres all but hawked as the pioneers of the alternative Christian scene. “I remember them. I have two of their albums on compact disc.”² My CD collection was somewhat of a Noah’s Ark scenario. When I was around 12 years old, God called me to catalogue the Christian Alternative Scene by building — or buying — a large plastic display tower and running a personal Discman³ through my car’s tape deck. From here, I gathered one of every kind of CD (except for Five Iron Frenzy — my brother bought all of those) in the hopes of someday

¹ “Seventeen Again” is a fantasy-comedy film. It first aired on Showtime on November 12, 2000, and was released on DVD on April 9, 2002. The film stars “Sister Sister’s” Tia and Tamara, as well as their brother, Tahj Mowry from “Smart Guy.”

² Compact discs are the companions to floppy disks, except they play music and are less pliable.

³ “Discman” is a 1990 feature film starring Kevin Costner as a radio DJ who makes a Major League Baseball team as a walk-on long shot.

Matt Francis is a filmmaker/media designer out of Virginia Beach and the drummer for Feral Conservatives, an indie rock band. You can check out his website at mfrancisfilm.com.



repopulating the earth with niche, righteous rock music.

My collection was once valued at over \$2,000, which, given inflation, is more like half a mil for someone who worked at Taco Bell for his fortune. Over the course of many moves — first college, then to Virginia Beach from Michigan, then multiple residences with varying cargo dimensions — my Ark diminished from being a display piece (every album meticulously arranged and alphabetized) to sitting in a closet to me tossing all the plastic cases, saving the discs for a spindle, keeping the jacket inserts for future generations to one day pair again with their mates. (And repopulate the earth.) A quick search through the stacks, now disorganized like a giant box of Legos, and my entire *Luxury* collection rests on my lap. The scratches seem minimal; it plays. When I crank it up, these artifacts roar with '90s rock vitality.

Luxury combined a sort of glam-meets-noise rock that hit big strides in anthems and equally prevalent and quirky ballads thanks to frontman Lee Bozeman's nasal (but affecting) voice. Two albums — *The Latest and the Greatest* (1997) and *Luxury* (1999) — are evenly split between fuzzed-out rock, noisy but rooted in pop ("The Latest and the Greatest") and genteel, sometimes middling, sparse, crooning numbers ("I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"). A couple things strike me when I relistened: how good the songs are, and how soaring the rock elements are. (This further mystifies why they couldn't hold my teenage interest.) Equally, it surprises me how much of the tunes come back. For records that seemed to slip past me, they sure left enough of a mark to recall nearly every melody across both albums. There is a bipolar element to the albums, and, per-

sonally, I find the rock and roll far more effective and suited to Bozeman and Co. than the more introspective stuff.

This is some of the best production I recall from any record of the era. It may align precisely on my bias, but the thing that strikes me is balance — there's an edge, a grit to the tunes. The guitars aren't just distorted, they're Cobained from crunchy-and-safe to powerful-and-raw. Make no mistake, *Luxury* is a pop band in structure and execution, maintaining melody and inventiveness, but the sounds combine into an aural soufflé that has perfectly risen. Opener "When Those That Are Not Do Become Those That Are" threatens to teeter too far into grimy, garage inaccessibility (and at five-minutes, might be bloated), while two tracks later, "Perpetua Simone" threatens to pop under the weight of its own bubble-gum hooks. Ultimately, the canoe stays afloat despite the dan-

gerous, flirtatious dance, and the songs all sound like they belong on the same disc. Even the lyrics — at times biting, satirical, or other times intimate prayers — brace themselves against and between social commentary and personal introspection. It does wear you out; by the time you hit tracks "King Me" or "The Lacklustre," the albums lose some wind in their sails. This could easily be a tracklisting issue, as tunes are grouped to rise early and roll off in excitement across the runtime, but really, the 6:33 "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" should have been written to be half as long, easy.

No worries, though; the album restarts, the springs reload, and between these two albums, there's plenty to celebrate, return to and — with the smart songwriting and lyricism — chew on, even as they dovetail into self-importance.

The CD era of the '90s was the age of overpriced, bloated albums, right

before the Myspace revolution ushered in the age of the digital single and the subsequent decline of the record label. Besides holding my coming of age, this era made music digestion, in comparison, difficult. It was costly, cumbersome and you actually had to wait for release dates (!). Even then, you'd have drive to a brick-and-mortar store. The process led to added value — certainly in a physical product — but in effort, too. If an album was discarded, it wasn't without proper evaluation.

Luxury holds some of the best of their era — and any era. I got vaccinated with *Luxury* 15 years ago, and their strain of music has been gestating under the surface all this time, mounting into a super infection. Tonight, for *Luxury* (what an apt name!), they can happily soundtrack my ascent into introverted sentience.

Few things sound as good at 62 miles per hour. Or 15 years later.

COLLIN SIMULA

All of my heroes are ex-Christians

Remember when Frodus put out an album on Tooth and Nail Records? I heard one of their songs on a compilation when I was 14. Abrasive vocals, angular guitars, less-than-straight-forward drumming and a mysterious image — they spoke my love language.

Ninth-grade Collin was like most ninth-grade Christian kids. I went to the Christian bookstore with the few dollars I made stocking shelves at the local grocery store, took a look at the “if you like (insert secular band name here), then you’ll love (insert Christian-band-ripping-off-secular-band name here)” chart and bought the latest Tooth and Nail release. I ended up picking up *Conglomerate International* (Frodus’ 1998 album on Tooth and Nail), I was scrambling through the liner notes.

No lyrics, just weird artwork. Dang. No thank you to God. Wait a second. I was at a loss. How was I going to know that this was a Christian release? How was I going to prove to my friends that Christians can make interesting music too? Worse — if this isn’t a Christian album — why did my favorite Christian record label release it?

I emailed the band one question:

*Dear Frodus,
I think Conglomerate International is awesome. Are you guys a Christian band? I’d really like to know.*

—Collin

It didn’t take long to get a response. Two days, maybe. I wish I still had the email. It came from their vocalist, Shelby Cinca — I was a teenager in the late ’90s, this was like 10 email addresses ago — but it was definitely not what a

14-year-old youth group kid wanted to hear. The answer was something along the lines of, “Why are you even asking me? What is a Christian band anyhow? What makes music Christian?”

I don’t really think I listened to the album a whole lot for the next few years. I felt betrayed by my favorite record label, I felt betrayed by the Christian bookstore that sold it to me. It took me a few years before I understood they were never a Christian band, and that it was one of the few times Tooth and Nail took a chance with a secular artist. And looking back, I wonder how many emails they got from kids like me asking the same question.

This story seems so silly and trivial to me now, but it represented a time in my life where this line of questioning was real. Why was it

my first inclination to make sure there was a Christian message behind the music? Why was it so important to me to make sure this band was comprised of upstanding Christian men before I even listened to the record? Why did Christians create a culture that puts legalism before creativity?

When a kids start a band, it’s generally because they like writing and playing music. If they happen to be Christians, then of course their beliefs are going to bleed into the lyrics and on to overall image of the band, just like they would in any other part of their lives. But most musicians aren’t cut out to be pastors. They haven’t adopted that lifestyle. There is very real pressure attached to being in a Christian band. Your every move is watched. Don’t cuss. No beer. No beer in pictures. Don’t show too much. Start every practice with a prayer.

Thank God in the liner notes.

No wonder so many members of Christian bands get burned out. No wonder that music scene can explode when someone important says something offensive or does something dumb. It all seems like a set-up, one that ultimately ends in failure.

No wonder so many of my heroes are ex-Christians.

It’s time to recognize music for what it is: An artistic outlet for feeling. It’s time we let our Christian bands be themselves, screw-ups with a limp like the rest of us. It’s time to let them use their art as catharsis. It’s time to stop expecting our favorite artists to believe for us, so we can sing along and feel better about ourselves.

It’s time to let our artists just be.

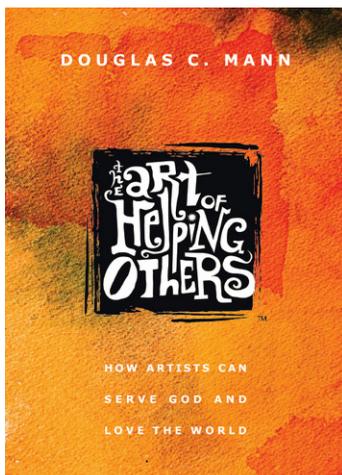
Collin Simula lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife Ciara and his three small children. During the day, he does design for a branding agency. In his free time, he makes very heavy music as Maranatha.



DOUG VAN PELT

‘THE ART OF HELPING OTHERS’

Getting from ‘What if?’ to ‘Why not?’



Douglas Mann ‘The Art of Helping Others’

IVP BOOKS

When I saw a new book from my old friend, Doug Mann, I had to check it out. I’ve known the guy for years, but had forgotten when he shared with me he had sort of gotten out of the music industry. Seeing this book was a fresh reminder, and I was eager to dive in and catch up on his life.

Mann started a small label called R.E.X. Records, and he and I started talking on the phone around the time the band Rage of Angels had a much-anticipated debut album coming out. Mann signed Believer and Sixpence None the Richer, among others. (Don’t forget Haven, either). I have spent many times chatting on the phone with this guy,

talking metal, Clarksville and life.

It was funny to read his stories, like when he met some beer-drinking, free-thinking and missions-minded believers (“liberals” or “obvious backsliders”). As I read it, Mann’s response to missions was typical of many: “I’m just not called to that, but I’ll write you a check.” It’s basically an uninformed viewpoint of what dedicating your talents and vocation to God can mean as a disciple. It’s not just about going to a remote village in Africa or Haiti. Missions is simply about aligning your focus (and life goals) with those of God’s. His “scarlet thread of redemption” runs through the Bible and is found in each of the covenants that He has made with man. Whether it’s with Abraham, Noah, Moses or Jesus, it’s about being a blessing to all nations and drawing all men to Him. Participating in that is a great joy, and that is why many missionaries will exude fulfillment, finding it hard not to smile.

I appreciated hearing about Doug’s exploits in the industry.

In the early days of my music career, I was leaking success — success after success. Even though I was part of elite teams that marketed and sold more than 15 million RIAA certified records, which lined my home and work offices with multi-platinum and gold album plaques, I knew there was something missing. The private jets to concerts, limos and hang-

ing with celebrities would leave me with a sense of wading through shallow water with little under the surface. Over time, success caused my heart to harden. I was closed to any suggestion of intimacy with God, even as the Spirit prompted my heart back to him. I became prideful and self-absorbed.

It is not incidental that I was becoming warped while working in the Christian music industry, where intimacy with God is a stated value. I said all the right things and created an acceptable professional persona, all the while hiding behind a safe, superficial facade. I was like the Wizard of Oz — smoke and mirrors all around, but behind the curtain just a little man.

I believed serving God meant trying hard, forging ahead with every fiber, racking up accomplishments and winning people’s approval along the way. In reality, I came later to understand, I was far more concerned about building my own kingdom, ostensibly serving others but mostly serving myself..

The author went to a workshop/music summit in Nashville where God began to convict his heart about intimacy. When he left that night, he had tears in his eyes and people asked if he was alright. His answer was awesome: “No, but I believe I’m going to be.”

After hanging out with some of these missionary folks, he would find his way home, closing his eyes and “breathing

deep the wonder of those warrior poets (Oscar Wilde, Michael Collins) whose creativity seemed to now reverberate in my heart and soul. If this was a part of my heritage, I thought, then maybe I, too, was a part of this larger work of opening people’s eyes to the richness of art, music and poetic words. It was my first thought of what I know recognize would become a deeply biblical and God-inspired call on my life.”

He was later challenged to shift his thinking when it came to doing something radical for God (“creative incitement”), going from “What if?” to “Why not?”

If our responses give voice to fear of criticism, we might decide to say nothing, do nothing and ultimately forsake our calling to creative incitement. It takes creative people to see Oz behind the world, to seek and discern the human condition. To practice creativity is to be more keenly aware of the complexity of the world, to recognize its fragile, fractured soul. It takes creative people to awaken that awareness in others. Creativity can beget creativity.

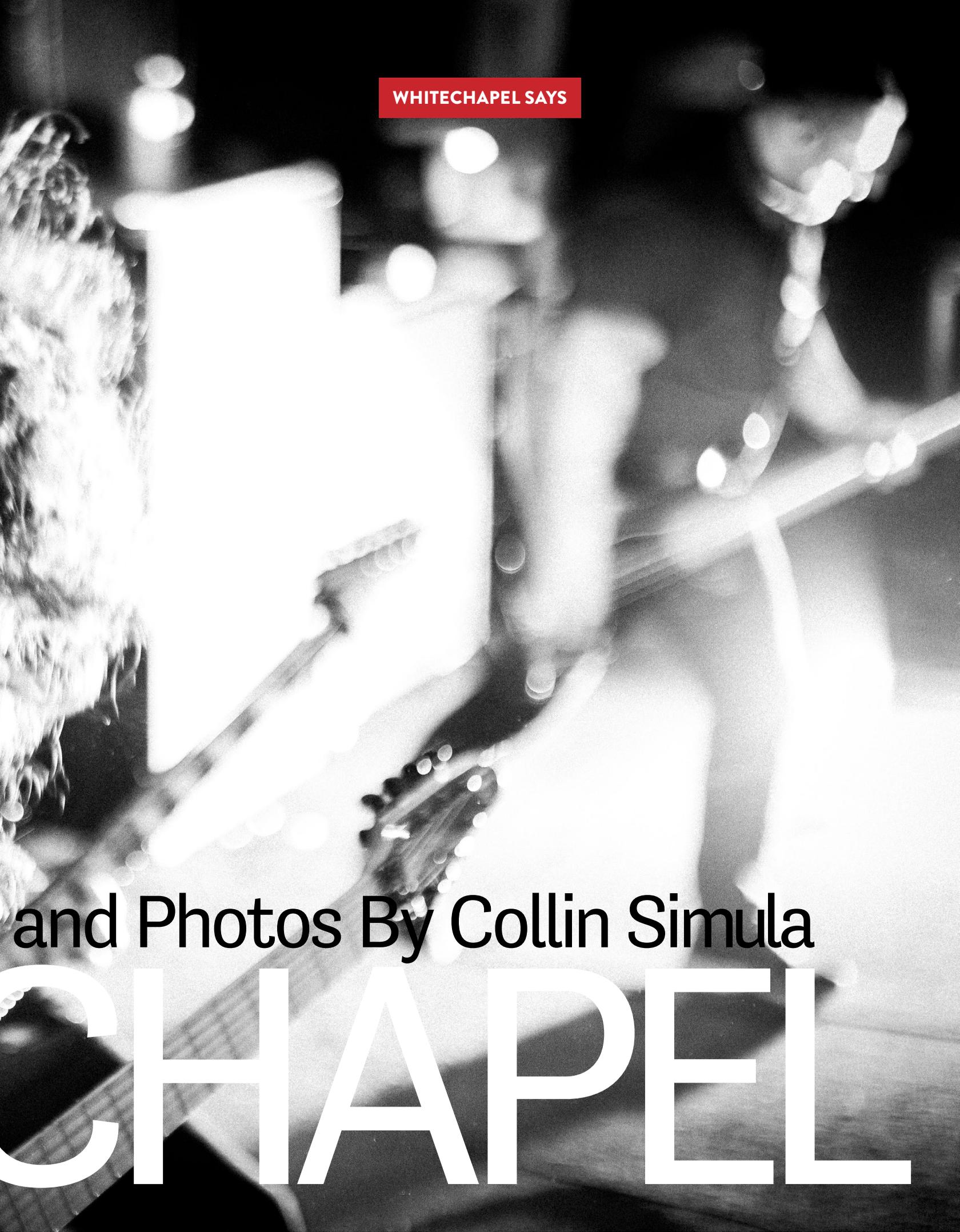
So begins the awakening Mann experienced as he embraced a calling to change the world and inspire other artists to do the same, to fulfill a role of promoting creative incitement. Like any good wake-up call or stirring, it’s likely to do a little of the same for anyone who will read or listen, and I’m better for paying attention.

WHITECHAPEL SAYS

An Evening with

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WHITECO



WHITECHAPEL SAYS

and Photos By Collin Simula

CHAPEL

WHITECHAPEL SAYS

“This is our way of life: Deafening ears and shutting mouths.”

— “The Saw is the Law,” from Our Endless War

I can definitely attest to the deafening nature of Whitechapel’s sound. Packed tightly in a sweaty, sold-out basement venue in Columbus, Ohio, their three-guitar, million-speaker-cabinet assault left my ears ringing a solid 48 hours after their set.

There’s never much room for middle ground in metal, but no one can argue that Whitechapel means business. As one of the leading bands in the deathcore genre, Whitechapel continues to evolve, setting a higher standard (or lower, if you’re talking about string tuning) with each release.

Currently headlining a tour in support of their recently released, fifth full-length, Our Endless War, I was able to pull guitarist and primary songwriter Alex Wade away for a few minutes and get his take on the business that is Whitechapel.

First things first: How was New England Metal and Hardcore Festival?

It was real good. We’ve played it a few times, but we haven’t in a while, so it was cool to go back there and be part of such a great festival. It was a great time. Plus, we got to support Behemoth, which was totally awesome.

I can’t imagine. How is this tour going so far? I know Within the Ruins just had to drop off.

(Within the Ruins vocalist) Tim Georgen had some serious health issues. After one of the shows, he ended up having to go to the hospital — the doctor told him that he shouldn’t be touring right now. He ended up being like, “Well, there’s this huge show we have to play.” The doctor said, “I mean, I can’t force you to stay here, but I would highly advise you not to do it.” He ended up doing it, and after their set, he was feeling so bad he ended up having to go back to the ER — they told him he absolutely could not finish the tour.

It’s a huge bummer, because they are good friends of ours. It’s a sh-tty circumstance, but I’m just glad Tim’s okay.

Definitely. I’ve gotta hand it to him for being metal and sticking it out for the festival.

Yeah man, he definitely wanted to be touring. He definitely tried. You could tell he really wanted to be out there.

You guys just raised \$58,000 in a crowdfunding campaign for a DVD release; your original goal was \$35,000. That’s an amazing success story. People tend to be passionately for or against the idea of crowdfunding, and I know that based on things you’ve said in the past, you’re pretty passionate when it comes to the music business. What’s your take on crowdfunding?

I think it’s great! You know, I think it’s good for

certain things, depending on how it’s used. I think it definitely has its place.

For us, once we were successful with the DVD funding, people were asking us things like, “Would you crowdfund an album?” I believe that a label putting out an album is better, in my opinion. I feel like a band needs some kind of team behind the record, one that really cares about its success and will push it, put money, marketing and advertising behind it.

With crowdfunding, you’re left to do everything by yourself. You can crowdfund a record, but then you have to find your own distribution, find an outside marketing company — all of that stuff ends up being a headache.

But with the DVD, it worked out really well because we always wanted to do a DVD, but they can be really expensive. Video is always going to be more expensive than audio. Anyone with a f-cking computer can make a good-sounding record these days — but not everyone can make a good looking DVD.

Crowdfunding was right for us for this DVD because — and I’m not trashing our label in the slightest — but there was no way they’d give us 60 grand to do a DVD. That’s not in the budget.

Yeah, it’s a niche audience.

Right. There’s only going to be so many people that want it. So our mindset was, why don’t we let the people

who actually want it basically go ahead and pay for it and help fund it? We had great support from our fan base. They really went the extra mile in helping us succeed and go over our original goal.

The bands that are more vocally supportive of crowdfunding are the bands that are also more vocal about the idea of giving their music away for free, and usually those who speak against crowdfunding are the ones who are most vocally supportive of the traditional record label model. And I think it’s refreshing to see a band that has decidedly taken a stance where all of these things are good, in the right place.

Yeah, exactly. You know, piracy is here to stay. People are always going to illegally download things. It’s not that we don’t put effort into creating a DVD, but with the music, we’re (creating it) directly. So if people are purchasing our music, it’s just like purchasing a piece of art. We’re artists. We’re making this music with our hands, our ears, our minds. With the DVD, it’s not our art; it’s the videographer’s. I think that everything has its place.

And it’s not like you’re asking people to just donate money into thin air, right? I mean, the way I see it, you’re inviting people to take part in your creative process — they can feel like they own the product in the end, because they helped make it happen.

That’s how I’ve always felt about it. I don’t understand why people get so up in arms about it. You’re getting something in return. To me, it’s just a glorified preorder.

Let’s talk about Our Endless War, your new record. I’m very intrigued by the lyrics to the lead single, “The Saw Is the Law.” It seems like you’re really owning your place in not only metal, but where you’re from, Knoxville, Tennessee. Is that what that song is about?

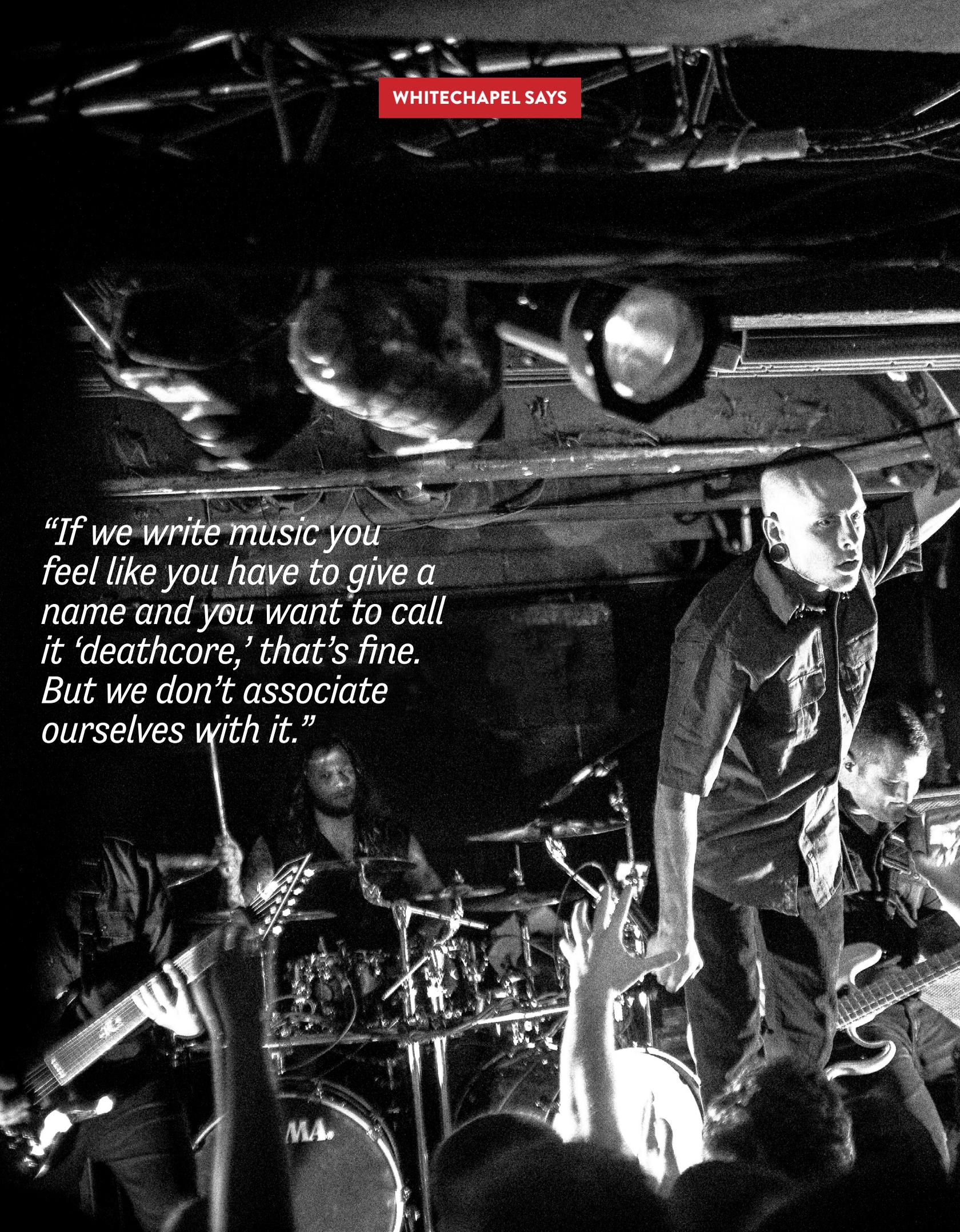
That song is basically about us as a band. We’ve been doing this for eight years, and it’s our lifestyle, you know? We’ve been on the road, creating music and putting it out there for our fans to purchase and be a part of what we do for a living. That’s pretty much what that song is about — just us being on the road, playing f-ckin’ shows and f-ckin’ sh-t up. *(Laughs.)*

Tennessee isn’t really known for its metal. When it comes to music, its main exports are country music and contemporary Christian music. The fact that Tennessee is the heart of the Bible Belt, with Nashville as the buckle, how does the atmosphere you guys came up in not only affect the music you write, but also the way it’s perceived back home?

It definitely wasn’t too easy coming up where we’re from and having the sound we did, especially in the earlier stages of the band when we were more

WHITECHAPEL SAYS





WHITECHAPEL SAYS

“If we write music you feel like you have to give a name and you want to call it ‘deathcore,’ that’s fine. But we don’t associate ourselves with it.”

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“extreme” sounding. I mean, we’re still heavy and extreme, but the newer stuff is focused more on the mainstream end of the heavy music realm.

But like you were saying, not a lot of metal bands come out of Tennessee, period. I think that says something about our music and us as musicians, that we were able to come out of an area that didn’t have much of a metal scene and really make a real name for ourselves. We were able to rise above it and make a real career out of our music.

Certain songs — “Prayer of Mockery” comes to mind — seem to be viscerally anti-Christian or anti-religious. How does that go over with your friends and family back home? I’m stereotyping here, but I’m assuming that being from Tennessee, you’ve all touched Christianity in some shape or form growing up.

Oh yeah. For sure. My family is all Southern Baptists, very Christian. I was raised in a Christian home. I was raised as a Christian. Now I suppose I’d consider myself agnostic. I just don’t really think there is or isn’t a God. It’s just whatever to me. I don’t really care, I guess.

I get that.

Our families have never really given us sh-t for it, but I mean, honestly, I don’t even think my parents have ever really taken the time to read our lyrics deep

enough to be like, “Wait, is this anti-Christian?” They hear cussing and ask, “Do you really need the cuss words?” And I just say, well, you know, we’re a metal band after all (*laughs*). It can be a little weird coming from such a Christian-area and having such negative lyrics.

Sure, but it seems like you guys have always had a really good push and pull with Christianity. You guys did some touring with Impending Doom back in your earlier days, right?

That’s the one thing. We’re not judgmental, just as we’d hope that no one would be judgmental toward us. Yeah, we were and still are great friends with Impending Doom, and there are more Christian bands we’ve had the pleasure of touring with, like The Devil Wears Prada. And we just want to show everyone that no matter how “dark” or “evil” our lyrics and music may sound, that doesn’t mean we can’t get along with Christians. And vice-versa: I’d hope that as “evil” as we sound, a Christian band wouldn’t pass judgment on us and think that we’re, like, f-ckin’ Satan-worshipping baby eaters.

(Laughs) Well, I didn’t catch that vibe when I saw you guys live the other night.

Good!

Another question about lyrics — and I know you’re

not the vocalist; I assume Phil (Bozeman, vocalist) writes most of the lyrics — the song “Our Endless War” sounds quite political. Is this a direction you guys are trying to take the band, being more politically outspoken?

I think the song does have a political stance to it. But with Phil, he just likes writing about things that are more reality-based, things that are going on in this nation today. Our older material was more fantasy-based, rather it be the Jack the Ripper stuff on *The Somatic Defilement* or the demonic-type lyrics on *This is Exile*. It was fiction.

A lot of the lyrics he writes now are based on things that have happened to him personally, or things that are going on in the world today. “Our Endless War” is pretty much about how our government has, obviously, gone to sh-t. It’s kind of a fictional approach to the idea of rising up as a nation and fixing the problems on our own, instead of continuing down the this sh-thole.

Are you guys unified behind Phil’s lyrics? Or do you guys just let him do his thing even if you’re not necessarily in line with what he’s singing?

It’s definitely the latter. I mean, no one has ever been like, “I have a problem with what you just said,” or anything like that, but no one really works alongside him with the lyrics. We just let him do his thing. He’s

such a talented vocalist and writer, when you let him do his thing, you know it’s just going to be magic. No one feels the need to have to say anything.

Right. It’s his instrument.
Yeah. For sure.

Last week when I saw you guys live, I noticed one or two of your shirts said “American Metal” really big across the front. You kind of touched on this a little earlier, talking about how your earlier material was more extreme. You guys have generally been described as “deathcore,” but I’ve heard a stylistic shift over the last few records, especially this new one. Our Endless War definitely has a more simplistic, in-your-face drive, rather than tons of blasting and technicality. Is this a decision you made as a band, to move away from the “deathcore” genre?

Yes. We just kind of got sick of, well... We don’t just sit down and say, “Okay, let’s write a deathcore song.” If we write music you feel like you have to give a name and you want to call it “deathcore,” that’s fine. But we don’t associate ourselves with it. To us, we’re just a metal band. We have influences from all across the metal spectrum, rather it be the thrashy side like Slayer or the death metal side like Cannibal Corpse to a more progressive side like Meshuggah.

We’re proud to be from America. We’re a metal

band. That’s just what we are. It gives us something to identify with, something that’s more mature, and it gives us a better look. We don’t want to have a bunch of shirts that say “deathcore this” or “deathcore that” or whatever. It makes us look immature. It just doesn’t look professional in my opinion. And having that tagline, “American Metal,” it just overall gives us a better presence in my eyes.

I agree. I think it also elevates you guys above a genre that can be so easy to be just another face in the crowd. It feels like it gives you guys lasting power.

Exactly. That’s exactly what we were going for. We’ve been doing this for eight years, and I’m hoping that 10, 15 years — when we start hitting those marks — we are still considered one of the top bands in what we do.

We always want to be growing the band. Getting bigger, getting better. We’re not satisfied with settling for something that isn’t what we think we could be doing better. Let’s face it, how big can a “deathcore” band really get? I’m not saying Whitechapel is going to be on the radio, getting gold records and in the Billboard top five. But I think if we position ourselves as a more mature metal band, a more adult-oriented metal band, we have a chance to reach out to more demographics.

More so than if we were just another “rinky-dink deathcore” band.



We've been doing this for eight years, and I'm hoping that 10, 15 years — when we start hitting those marks — we are still considered one of the top bands in what we do.

WHITECHAPEL SAYS



WHITECHAPEL SAYS



How the world's premiere steel guitarist rekindled success and fulfillment in the Family

By Doug Van Pelt

Something incredible happened last summer, but somehow it went unnoticed. Of course, if you are truly hip, you noticed. You have this album and this story is old news. If you were sleeping, like I was, you missed a bright, shining spot in a somewhat dull year: Robert Randolph and the Family Band released perhaps the best album of the band's career.

Most of you already know the story about this humble guy and his band of brothers and friends – how he exported a very insular and original sound from a small Northeastern U.S. denomination called the House of God Church. It's

sometimes called “Sacred Steel,” and it turned the ears of everyone from music critics, jam band enthusiasts, rockers, blues masters, guitar freaks and even Eric Clapton himself, who tapped the young band as a supporting act for some of his big one-day festivals and touring.

If you somehow missed this musical revolution, you only missed what writer John Thompson calls “probably the best thing to happen to rock and roll in the past 30 years.” The outside world probably heard from Robert Randolph first the way they should have – with a live album. It was probably either the

band's first album, *Live From the Wetlands*, or the compilation album from John Medeski and the North Mississippi All-Stars, *The Word*. It captured this wonderful new sound that seemingly stretched the limits of guitar, or at least sweetened it to a whole new level. Imagine the soulful blues of Steve Ray Vaughan and the controlled chaos of a Jimi Hendrix. It's head-turning, ear-bending and mind-blowing all wrapped into one. When I first saw this guy and his band tearing down a giant ballroom stage in Nashville, I felt the strongest sense of flesh and spirit, love and worship, romance and rev-



erence.

It's magic. Certainly not run of the mill. It's probably physically impossible to attend one of his shows and yawn, no matter how tired you are. Energy and

soul just explode from that lap pedal steel instrument and a band that knows how to lock in a groove. Fast-forward past three studio albums (*Unclassified*, *Color Blind* and *We Walk this*



Road) and the complacency of time steps in, the public's attention span so easily distracted. It made for some great songs to add to their live set (like "I Need More Love"), but it didn't exactly

capture the magic found at any of their live shows. The band that gave rock and roll a shot in the arm needed one itself.

Lickety Split is a hopeful sign that there's still people

in this record industry that haven't forgotten what soul is. The band was given the privilege and responsibility of producing it themselves, and a legendary engineer was inserted to do just what

he's known for – capturing magic. Eddie Kramer got behind the mixing board and the result is truly special. It doesn't take too many tracks into the album until the listener is likely

to raise his or her hand to emulate the album cover graphic.

I had the pleasure of chatting on the phone with Robert Randolph during my lunch break while parked

behind the Palmer Events Center in Austin as forklifts and semis circled around in preparation for the South By Southwest Conference. He was enthusiastic to talk about his latest album, which is still on his mind as the band lays down tracks for a new one.

“Lickety Split is really full of energy and really captured who we are - all the mixtures of blues and gospel,” he said to me. “We were able to do a couple of great covers. We had a chance to go into the studio and really play a lot of the stuff live and have the engineers just really help us out and really craft out something that sounds really different in the music marketplace today. We sort of got back to the roots of who we are.”

I feel like you really captured the balance between being tight yet loose. It doesn't sound like you're just live in the studio. It sounds like a well-crafted album.

For me it was just kind of really trying to have that mixture of things you

can really just jam out to and feel organic, but also sound like who we are but without the effects or trying to craft out all these other things. It was a mixture of all that. First and foremost, we had to get in the studio and just get in the room and play the songs. A lot of people really don't record music like that anymore - they don't all just sit in a room and play. A lot of times bands will just piece together their songs. Usually you have some demos that some guy plays guitar to and some guy plays drums. You've got these engineers and editors that say, “Nah, we can get everything if you just split 'em up.” We're guys that like to feed off each other and have it be spontaneous. Those things get picked up while you're in the studio.

We had an opportunity to work with Eddie Kramer, who likened a lot of that stuff to when he recorded Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix. He said, “Look man, these guys would just get in the studio and play... Just be yourself and you'll know. Once a song starts

feeling good, you'll have these magical moments you can't repeat.”

What kind of tension do you feel when you try to repeat the magic and have to take it again?

That's kind of it being magic - you can't really repeat it. Sometimes you'll have to choose the best take. The hardest thing to do in the studio is to repeat a great moment. That's just something that you just can't really repeat. When you have that kind of magic happen, you just kind of choose “that's the one that feels better” and you just go.

How did it feel sharing the spotlight with the various band members?

For me, it's kind of a natural thing that happens for us growing up in church. Music is a language. If you listen to James Brown or Sly and the Family Stone, there's a lot of different things that make up this one sound. James Brown - if you take out the guitar part that sort of repeats itself, or the horn parts, it

kind of takes away from the feel of the song. Everybody plays this role and you have this one, cohesive, rhythmic sound. For us growing up in church, we had that - you had the one leader, but it's all working together.

What have you learned about the recording process that you hope to repeat in future recordings?

There's nothing like getting all the band into a room and you just kind of play freely. That's really the best music. That's how all the great music that we love today was made. You kind of sat in there, you went through five or six tries and each time, you know, the bass player does a fill or the drummer does a fill and the guitar player does something and you've got this sort of energy going where that helps you create these magical moments and magical riffs. It's a quicker process of recording when you do it like that. We were in the studio with Carlos Santana for two and a half days and we basically recorded nine or ten songs. That's a whole record. We

could only put two of them on here, because it would have just been a Robert Randolph/Carlos Santana sort of collaboration if we did that, which would be cool someday.

How was it bringing in a bunch of friends and guest musicians?

They were magical moments, being there with guys like Carlos Santana and seeing how he works and how he composes ideas together. It's real magical stuff and I'm real blessed to be a part of that and see it. It's really one of the coolest things that you could do - to see him in action.

You've been able to travel the world with music. If you were able to evaluate yourself then and now, how have the experiences you've had changed you?

Each record I've changed. We've been blessed to be in it this long and to be in the process now of making another record that'll probably be out in the middle of summer. It's great to keep doing it.

You learn. At the beginning of your career, you're kind of just moving and moving. Everything's new and you don't really know what's going on. People are calling you a rock star and you're trying to do all these rock star things. You're showing up at all these events and this and that. It kind of starts to get away from the original energy of just going into the studio and writing and recording.

It's a good thing and a bad thing we've gotten to this point... We haven't made as much music as (what) we have in us – the creativity, which will all happen now. I'm kind of glad we've gotten to this point, because it helps us take a step back and look at everything and see what's been done wrong. It's sort of like a new beginning for us, and I kind of like that. From early on, being around all these guys, we had all this buzz. buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz. We kind of got into the studio and didn't have as much fun as we've had lately. It's really a blessing to have gone down that road.

How has your church responded to your success, your performance, your music and art all these years?

I took something that was original to our church – with our church having the steel guitar in our church (services), it goes back 80 years. It was kind of like the Buena Vista Social Club. I was like the main musician guy that stepped out and went in this direction. At first there was a lot of negative kickback, but through the years, they've seen us spreading the love, going around the world, telling the story, doing that, being who we are. It's really been a blessing, so they've been really supportive lately.

What have been some of the most mind-blowing things that people have told you?

There have been a number of things. I don't know if I could pinpoint any one. Playing with guys like Eric Clapton, Dave Matthews, Carlos Santana, Buddy Guy, Earth, Wind and Fire. Each guy has a different set of inspiration lines they

would tell me. It's all been instrumental and an extension and a growth of who I am, so it's really been a good feeling. Each guy has given me a bunch of great knowledge through the years.

What's next on the horizon for you? Future plans?

We're in the process of making another record. We've got two concepts going right now. We may do one concept of old, '60s covers. We're finding all these songs that people may not know. We've also written a bunch of new original songs. Maybe we'll do two of them. I don't know.

What do you predict is the future of Christianity and the church in the near future?

What's funny is Christianity has grown a lot and has really opened a lot of people's eyes. That to me is one of the great things about Christianity. As the world has opened up, as the Internet has exposed – you know, because the history of

Christianity in this country has been according to someone else's preferences and their own lifestyles. Even with all these great movies coming out now about Christianity and a lot of people now having the opportunity to travel the world and see different things, it's really grown so people can have their own outlook on it.

For me and my church, there was a whole set of bylaws in another book that we would try to align with the Bible and, at the end of the day, the Bible is the only outline you need. That's really been the problem. It's sad and funny at the same time. I watched the movie "12 Years A Slave" and there's a scene in that movie where the house slave masters would gather all the slaves together on Sunday and have a Bible study/church service. It's funny how the guys would find things in the Bible and try to align them. They'd say things like, "If you're not good to your master, then you need to get 100 lashes."

It's so funny, because I'd ask my grandmother about those stories and she'd say, "Oh yeah. That was true." That's what her mother and grandmother would tell her. So, it's just that Christianity has grown to where now it's become this universal – it's not about Baptist and Pentecostal and Methodist and this and that and all these other little things. It's all just becoming one Christian movement.

I know a bunch of Gospel and Christian artists out there, too. I'll try to encourage a lot of them, because a lot of them don't think they're as cool and as famous as they are. I'm like, "Look, man, you guys really are. At the end of the day, you guys can always have a church home to play with. Once all these rock stars get off of TV, they don't have any outlet. They can't even go make any money anywhere. You guys can go and play a service, have a program and have a concert in a church service all over the country and still be able to do great, so it's really cool to see how it's all grown.



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WE ARE ALL

Interview by Chelc Eaves
Introduction by David Stagg



COMRADES

Photos by Callie Gajdica



I had never been anywhere north of Kansas. I only went to Kansas because my sister went to school there. That's also the only reason I've ever been to Oklahoma, to drive through it en route to Kansas.

There's a lot of corn up north in the upper Midwest, the seemingly infinite gap of states until you smash into the traffic jam of cities before the Great Lakes. The corn jokes are true-to-form; it was like seeing a ton of potatoes in Idaho, then being surprised when you saw a lot of potatoes in Idaho.

I was there for the inaugural Audiofeed festival, a two-day music event among the corn in Urbana, IL (you fly into Indianapolis), designed to fill the void left by the now-defunct yet widely-known Cornerstone Festival. I was staying in a host home the festival organizers provided to me, and it was owned by one of the most wonderful men I have ever had the pleasure of meeting, a man named Merle. While technically he's the home owner, he's also the home builder; he constructed the entire home with his own hands. A little here, a little there, a bedroom over there, an extra bathroom attached over there.

A while back, his wife passed away from cancer, and instead of move or sell or get married again or live alone, he found his place in the world housing traveling souls. He's housed conventional travelers like musicians and family, but on a whim, he once housed a man he barely knew for what would end up being over three years. That's probably not even his weirdest story, but it's the one that came up when we got to talking on his stairwell.

Adding to his lore, he would disappear. After he showed us around the first night, He treated his home as if it was yours and he was just taking care of you. He would stay up late talking into the night but would leave before we would wake up, the Coffee on the kitchen counter brewed.

On the first day of music, I watched Comrades perform an incredible set. The band — married couple Joe and Laura McElroy and drummer Ben Trussell — played a passionate and intimate set, with the couple positioned facing each other in the middle of the stage. The music was evocative and had a cadence, rising and falling around a broader crescendo and climax, its allure enticing; you don't often see it on the faces of musicians anymore.

When the festival subsided, Comrades was still sitting behind their merch table. When I asked them about it, the way they saw it, there was no closing time and no better place to be than ready for a potential sale. I'd wager most touring musicians probably feel the same way. Pack it up now, pack it up then, this beat-up Volkswagen is our home. Drive it to the next show, sleep in a Walmart parking lot, shower with bottled water.

I told them to come stay with us.

Like a scene from a movie, the lot of us — me, Comrades and our then-intern Taylor Rhea Smith — asked Merle every question we could think of. We sat in his living room in a circle and listened to his answers patiently. The man had a skill, and like any other skill, it will fade with time and without practice: storytelling. He spoke like an artist would paint, an older man's worn-in voice laboring with rhythm and purpose. I like to believe all of us there that night were listening to how we wanted to sound at that age. We were envious of his stories. Maybe because they were filled with a time just out of our reach, but they also contained a pained nostalgia. I don't pray at night to go through rebuilding my home after my wife dies from cancer. I know Merle doesn't either, because he only prays for one thing: God's will.

When I left for the festival the next morning, I said goodbye to Laura and left the other two-thirds asleep; I don't know when the last time they saw a bed was. I haven't seen them since then, but because of that experience, their music can paint for me. I believe that to be the fruit of the music-listening experience, connecting on a level that quite literally seems impossible because it's connected to a memory. Driving the country in a beat-up wagon, Comrades is creating their own history, keen on living a life worth telling.

Here, HM's Chelc Eaves takes some time out to walk with Comrades' guitarist Joe as he tells the stories that make up the fabric of Comrades' latest release, *Safekeeper*.

HM: You guys are on the road right now, right?

Guitarist Joe McElroy: We're actually leaving tomorrow morning. We've been at home for about a week and a half and we're heading back out tomorrow morning.

What's your first date?

We're playing in Johnstown, Pennsylvania tomorrow. We're heading north and west.

Are you all ready?

Joe: Pretty much, actually. Usually it's a scramble getting ready, but we're pretty well prepared this time.

Tell us a little bit about Comrades and how the band got started.

This is a bit of a novel.

Go ahead. If you've got time, I've got time.

Appreciate it. Cool. Me and a roommate in college had started playing together for fun. We always had the idea of starting a band, but I was in a hardcore band back in college. When I finally left the hardcore band, me and this guy started taking it a bit more seriously.

At the school we went to, there was this, like, talent show where bands could audition and play a cover song. We got to play in front of, like, 6,000 people, and so we wanted to do that.

At the time, I was trying to get this girl, Laura, to date me. She was still a little on the fence about (playing the gig), but just because it was a "one-time thing" for a talent show, we figured, well, she could sing and play guitar. We ended up doing that Sixpence None the Richer song called "Kiss Me."

Yes.

We did that and we ended up making it and playing the talent show thing in front of all those people. After that, we kind of had, I guess, a connection between the three of us, and we had never done anything like that before.

From that point forward, we had tried to find a bass player, but the people we had tried out just hadn't really

worked out. We ended up just starting to play with her.

I was kind of a little bit weird about it, because we had just started dating and I was like, "What if this doesn't work out? This could be really awkward." We ended up working out wondrously.

Over the remainder of that semester, we wrote a five-song EP and recorded it. We were going to go on a little, two-week tour to get our feet wet at the beginning of the summer. This was back in the days of MySpace, 2008. MySpace was the biggest thing ever. We set out on this little tour not having any idea what we were doing. We ended up getting offered to open other people's shows and jumping on random mellowcore concerts and stuff like that. We ended up touring for two months that summer.

After that, we were kind of like, "We should go for this."

(The two of us) and the original drummer ended up parting ways. He wanted to focus on school and we wanted to do this. We've had a couple different people play drums for us since then.

That was how it got started. It actually started as a cover band for a talent show. We all had the ideas and hopes it would become more than that; that was an excuse for us to start playing together.

Yeah, but did you all end up winning the talent show?

There wasn't a winner. We went to a really big college. I think over 200 bands tried out. Basically, winning was getting picked to play because there was only 12 slots to play.

Oh, for sure.

It was just cool to actually get to play. There wasn't really a winner or a loser.

Though, ultimately, you won the girl, so.

Yeah, exactly, exactly. I got the girl in the end, and now we're happily married. Just one little more thing about that. At (the talent show), everybody was singing along with Laura when she was performing the song, so she was jokingly known around cam-

pus as, "Oh, that's that 'Kiss Me' girl." But it was just a funny thing.

How long have you all been together now, the band?

That was spring of 2008. Oh, gosh, almost six years. Technically, almost six years. We started out under a different name and it was kind of a different sound. In the current iteration, like, four and a half years, but Laura and me have been doing it for basically six years.

Coming from just an accidental, we're-going-to-do-this-as-a-talent-show band to now, an actual band. That's pretty cool.

I mean, we all wanted it to be a real band. The talent show was just kind of an excuse for us all start playing together.

Having been on over 20 tours now, tell us what are some of your most memorable and favorite ones.

When we first started and we did that first tour, we had absolutely no idea what we were doing and we ended up getting on all those really cool shows. There was that element of awe and wonder, of, "This is actually a real thing." A lot of the young bands that go on tour for the first time, a whole other world opens up to you. That was definitely one of the coolest experiences for that.

We're from Virginia, so we're pretty much as far to the East Coast as you can get, so for us, actually making it out to the West Coast on tour. I always feel like it's an achievement. It's cool that your music can take you all the way across the country.

I don't know, I think I lost track of the original question. I do that pretty hard.

Maybe people that you've played with or things that you've gotten to do on tour?

Man. I've gotten to do so many cool things on tour. We went cliff jumping in north Georgia one time — or it might have been southern Tennessee — with a band we were on tour with. The last tour that we actually just got home from was really cool. We went out with this young hardcore band.

You just need to understand, when you're on tour with another band, you really develop an almost family-like relationship with them. You just end up being really close friends. That's something that was just so awesome on the last tour that we did: seeing a band that was where we were six years ago, seeing them in the early stages of finding their real happiness on the road, seeing people light up when they played their music...

What drew you to work in this genre?

Everyone was in a five-piece hardcore or metal band back in 2007, 2008. I was a teenager coming into music. Heavy music and intense, underground music always had a huge, encouraging effect on me in my life, I always wanted to be a part of.

There were so many bands doing the hardcore and metal thing at that point we were like, "How can we do something that's intense, that has this same kind of energy, that isn't exactly the same?" We were just trying to do something that was outside of the box. I don't know. It sparked us to say, "How can we incorporate different sounds, and maybe approach the same goal but from a different direction?"

Does anyone in particular influence your musical talent?

I can definitely list some influences, but a lot of them are bands from 2008, from back then. I think when we got started down this path, we had a lot of influences, like the earlier As Cities Burn albums, Beloved and Thrice. I listen to The Fall of Troy a lot.

I still listen to all those old albums.

I do, too. I still listen to all those albums. People laugh at me, but I'm still stuck in the mid-2000s, man. There was unique, thought-provoking, heavy music going on back then.

Honestly, that's a lot of what our influences are. I think we kind of just took that. When you're out on tour, you see so many bands all the time. I think being out on tour actually really shapes what bands sound like in the long term because you really see



where the country, as a whole, is at musically.

Those albums, back then, were still a pretty big staple of what we sound like, even today, I think.

The new album, *Safekeeper*, is coming out May 6. What are some proud moments from making the new record?

It was really cool to actually see come together. Once we got the tracking of the album finished, to be able to look at even the rough mixes and say, “Wow, this came together better than I ever thought

it would,” that was a proud moment.

In the past, recording, for us, was always a very low budget, DIY-type of thing. This (probably) was, too, compared to most albums, but just to have the outside input of the people from the record label, having other people also trying to make the album better than just us was really cool.

Our drummer is ridiculous. He recorded all the drums for the whole album in a day. We kept giving him cups of coffee and water, and he just did it.

He just went in and killed it, huh?

Yeah, and there wasn't even that much editing. There may have been, I don't know, one or two drum edits on each song. He's just a machine. And of course it took me weeks to get the guitars right. It was awesome to see Dan really shining in that moment.

One thing I will say, when we started recording this album, we didn't know if there were going to be any vocals on it at all. We hadn't made up our mind yet, (but) we thought it would be really cool to put a little bit

of vocals back in. Then, when I first cued it up and Laura did the first couple of takes of vocals, it was just like, “Why has Laura not been singing more?”

Do you have any favorite songs off the new record?

That's interesting, the songs that I liked originally. I think with any band, as they're writing an album, there are songs you like more and like less, and there are parts you think are awkward. The song I thought would be one of my least favorites turned out to be my favorite.



through a lot of time of spinning our wheels and not knowing if the band was going to be a thing or not. Ben, who's playing drums for us now, was in our band a long time ago, and then wasn't in our band for a while, and now he is again. I think through member changes and some of the stuff that happened, we had gotten really discouraged.

When we wrote this album with Ben, he wasn't even sure he was going to be in the band full time. He just came down here and we literally wrote music in our living room for a week. That was basically the backbone of the album. It was almost like proving to ourselves that this was what we were supposed to be doing. It was like an affirmation of, "Okay, this is where we're at." This music is something that expresses the last year and a half, two years of frustration we've had in not really knowing where the band was going.

The music itself, I think if there was one single album that I would say influenced us more than anything else, it's probably *Son, I Loved You At Your Darkest* by As Cities Burn. That's probably the closest influence to this album, which is weird because that's something we all listened to when we were 17. It's something, I feel, that has a similar intensity. That record, obviously, has screaming the whole way through and is a masterpiece.

If there is an overall message you could see fans taking away from this album, what would it be?

Definitely. The overarching theme of this album is finding home and finding acceptance. As we're a band that tours a good portion of the year, home is something that's been kind of difficult for Laura and I to understand and figure out. We're a husband and wife trying to be a family. How does that play into being gone all the time and being in a car all the time? People are searching for where they are truly accepted and where they can truly be themselves. For

us, we found that home out on the road with the community that is America's music community. I'm just starting to fully understand that, I guess, that home doesn't have to necessarily be a place. It's people. Home for us is the people we know and the people we love in all corners of the country.

What's the worst thing to happen to you while on tour?

We haven't had anybody throw lemons at us or anything. We've never had anything like that. This homeless dude outside actually pulled a knife on our drummer and tried to rob him. I think that was probably our lowest point.

That's a good answer to the question, getting robbed (laughs).

He didn't even get robbed! I don't know if he was really drunk or really high or whatever, but our drummer actually said something really lame like, "I bet that cop behind you would love to see that knife," or something. He turned away and just ran inside.

In your musical career, what do you think your greatest opportunity has been?

That's tough. That's such a broad question. I don't know if you mean opportunity to make a difference in the world or to have a lot of people hear your band or what. I don't know what you're asking.

It's your interview. You can make it mean whatever you want it to mean.

This is the lame answer: through touring and through all this stuff, we've been able to actually make a difference in people's lives. That's what I think is important about music. Every musician has a platform. Every musician has the ability to impact people in one way or another. The fact that we've been able to use that, hopefully, for good is really an honor to be a part of. It's just really cool knowing how many people are actually going to hear this music and hopefully can be encouraged by our music.

That wasn't lame at all. That was an awesome answer.

Okay, that was kind of the Sunday School answer.

(Laughs) "A Sunday school answer..." No, that was good. What are some things that encourage you to pursue your musical endeavors?

I think all three of us have the exact same reason. Going back to when we were teenagers, we were impacted by bands that we liked. Those people in those bands were able to make a difference and steer our life in the direction.

That's something we want to be able to pass on and hope to have that effect on other people. We definitely come from different, varying backgrounds. My dad was a recording engineer. My parents have always understood the touring music thing a lot better than probably a lot of other people's parents, who are like, "Why aren't you in school? Why don't you have a real job?" My parents have been a big support in it. All three of us, our parents all understand it now, pretty well.

If fans wanted to help you in any way at all, what could they do?

Coming out to shows is the biggest thing. The music community lives off of live music and off of the experience that's created when you have the performer and the person that's taking in the art. Those people can make that connection. That's where awesome stuff happens, spiritually, and where friendships are made.

It's one thing to like a band because you heard them on the Internet. It's a totally different thing when you've actually met them and experienced them and the band has been able to meet and get to know the people that are supporting their art. Coming to shows and being a part of that one-on-one. That's the most important thing for any band.

†

Eaves is a Contributing Writer to HM.

This is going to be really awkward because I actually don't know all the names of the songs yet. We named the songs three weeks ago. That's always been something we struggled with. We have all these songs and we always call them, "Oh, the song with the singing in it," or, "That's the song with the heavy part."

What would you say were some things that inspired the creativity behind *Safekeeper*?

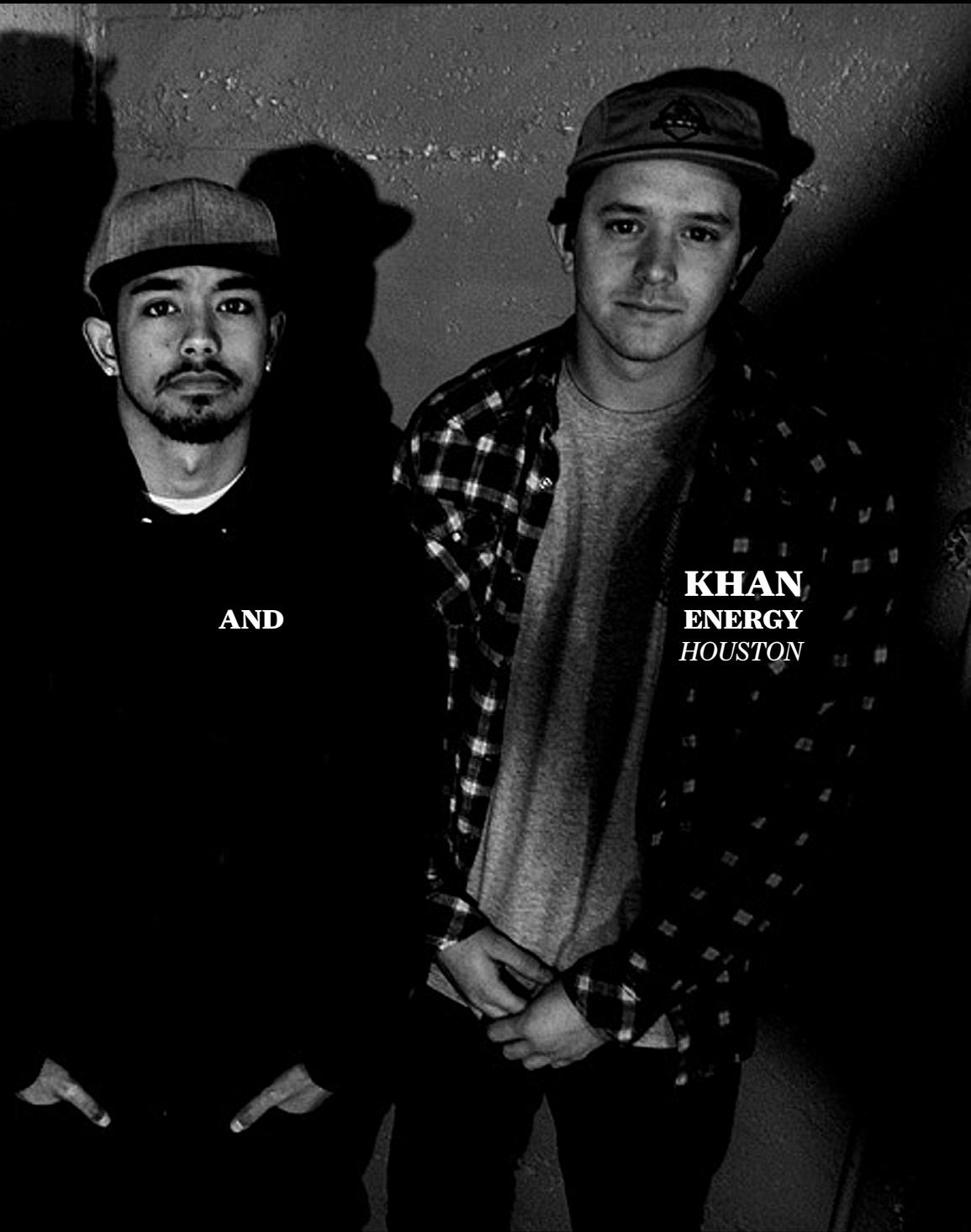
Again, this may not be the answer you're looking for, but I think, overwhelmingly, we went



KUBLAI
PEACE,
BY

LOVE

ROB



AND

KHAN
ENERGY
HOUSTON



Photo by Blair Truesdell

BLAIR TRUESDELL

I met Matt Honeycutt at a hardcore show in Sherman, Texas; it was the first time I saw Kublai Khan. I wasn't blown away musically, but what Honeycutt said between songs made me love the band. He openly stood up for human rights. He spoke out against racism, kids piling on top of Honeycutt and each other during the show to scream, "F-ck you, bigot!" into the mic. Five years of hard work, touring and maturing later, the band has finally seized their first break, signing to Artery Recordings. Their music is a better breed, now, and I still enjoy talking with Honeycutt. Talking to the vocalist recently, it's clear Kublai Khan still has a number of chapters left to be written.

HM: You guys have been DIY for the past four years?

We were DIY for a really long time. We had some help from my buddy Daniel as far as booking, about the past year, year and a half, two years. Other than that, we never really had a team behind us. We printed all our own merch, did most of our own designs. Our buddy Chris, from Houston, did a lot of them.

We tried to keep everything in Texas as far as where we would get help from. It was pretty rough for a while because we were doing it all ourselves, but at the same time, we got some good experience from it, as well as the satisfaction of knowing we can't just have sh-t handed to us. Looking back on it now, I wouldn't change it. I would have kept it the exact same way we did it because I feel like it helped bring us up right in the music community, as far as paying our dues, as far as eating sh-t at shows.

It's tough to do it all yourself. When you do it yourself, it is what is. If it goes well, you can be proud of it. If it doesn't go well, at least you know you can try harder next time.

You're one of those bands who were constantly on the road. Every time I looked up, you were always on tour, out there with somebody. A lot of people saw the hard work you guys put into your band; now, you guys are signed. How does that feel?

Yeah, it was an incredibly good feeling, and for the last five years, nobody in our band had any expectations as far as (being signed). It started out as fun, and then it became, "Hey, let's keep doing tours. This is enjoyable."

It made us feel alive for the first time in our lives, and it's the kind of thing people would always ask, "How come you guys aren't signed?" We never really had an answer for them. We were just like, "We're just doing what we want to do." It had never really come to our attention — except for about the last two years — that we might need a label backing us because it was getting to the point where we were constantly out. We were playing festivals and slightly bigger tours than we had been before, and we had

also been turned down for a lot of things because we didn't have a label backing us. We'd been turned down to do several bigger tours. I say bigger, but I mean bigger for a band our size. We started to see that it was kind of... We were only getting as big as we could in the circle we kept traveling in. That was the first time joining a label had even really come to our attention

We probably could have kept going DIY. I think that any band in the world could be DIY. It's just a matter of how much you want to push yourself.

But it's a good feeling, because (now) we don't feel so alone. We have a team. We have people that are out there to help us, push us in the right direction, can help us do a lot of the stuff that's over our heads, bigger than us, that we can't do on our own. We're very proud of it. We're honored to be a part of a label now, especially one that is taking good care of us.

We're not really used to it yet, just because it's real new, and — I've got to be honest with you — I've always been a little bit guarded to the idea. You're putting your child in someone else's hands and just hoping for the best, but I'm happy it happened.

After five years of getting turned down, getting shot down and just having sh-t shoveled in our face, it's kind of nice to have some people want to help us out of the trenches a little bit, so we're really, really honored to be a part of that.

Talk to me about this new record you guys are getting to put out on Artery. I listened to the record before this interview, and there are a couple of songs I recognize, ones I've seen you guys play at shows for the past couple of years. How much new material did you guys have to write for this record, and how much old material did you guys finally get to record?

It's pretty evenly split. There's more new material than old material, but all the older material, a couple of them were singles that we put out, even up to almost three years ago. We didn't put out our EP except about three or four years ago. We've kind of

been floating around, doing all this on empty.

We've been playing singles and (songs from) an EP released four years ago, (but) it was good for us to write new stuff because we'd always been in the position that, right whenever we'd sit down and start to write and get something cool going, we would have a member leave or something bad happen or we'd have to leave the tour or do whatever. That's not an excuse, but we would always just kind of put it off.

It never really bothered us too much, because, like I said, we didn't ever expect stuff to kick up as quick as it did within the last two years. It went pretty quickly, as far as we actually were not getting stiffed at shows. We couldn't keep playing the same areas, playing the same stuff. The majority of this album is all new stuff, and our newest guitar player is actually the one who wrote it.

It's pretty cool to me because it seems pretty seamless with the old material. The whole album was kind of written as... The people who listened to us before, they'll realize that some of it is old, and then for those people who have never listened to us before, it's all new, but it all blends. It all sounds like it comes from the same source, and it all sounds like it's Kublai Khan. That's how we want to sound, like it's Kublai Khan.

For the people who have never heard us before, I'd be excited to see what they'd say, (see) what they thought was new and what they thought was old. They might be surprised because it blends pretty well, and that's something we're happy about.

Who did you guys get to record this with?

We recorded it at Catharsis Studios with our really good friend Ron Harvey, and there was no other choice as far as who we would have gone to. We love him to death. He's one of our best friends, and it's important to us to get a producer that understands us, that doesn't just sit us down and, "OK, here's a quick track. Let's do this album."

We planned it ahead of time, and he would throw in all these ingenious

little ideas, just little stuff that I feel like really made the album come to life more so than we could have done ourselves. It's good to have somebody that understands.

We've loved all his work before. It's kind of funny. We've talked to him about it several times, but he's gone even outside of just recording us. He was the one who originally showed our album TO WHAT which eventually led to that full U.S. tour on their first U.S. headliner. He's been our Guardian Angel, looking out for us for a long time. He's showed us nothing but love, and we show him nothing but love and respect. It's deeper than just what kids are going to listen to on

about being raised by a single mom. Why do you think your lyrics are so unique compared to other vocalists in this scene?

First off, I appreciate that. I'm glad you think my stuff is unique; that means a lot. It's the kind of thing I just pull from my life, which I feel like, at the same time, is pretty normal. It's not too unique. But I remember going to shows, and I remember listening to bands like Bury Your Dead and Remembering Never and stuff, bands that, at the time, I didn't realize would have molded me so much. Not even just as a musician, but as a human being. I would listen to that and be like, "These guys are saying stuff that

opinion, disrespectful to the people who come out and see us, the people who need it. I was one of those people.

I needed that. I needed to hear that from somebody that I looked up to, that sh-t's not that bad. And it's just like, it's not that bad because you're able to talk about it. If you're able to express it and get it off your chest, you'd be surprised. There are people you'd never expect will relate, and you can build friendships and relationships off the stuff that, at face value, you would've never thought you'd have in common.

I'm just talking about stuff that's relevant to my life, and if it means something to other people, that means

or not — you have a home within a group of people that are also diverse. Why did you want to do that?

I feel like, at the time, writing it, I was just mad. I would go to shows in particular, and I'd see people that really didn't have that much in common coming together and being friends, but then also other people that had a lot in common that just were being ignorant about stuff. They'd say the littlest sh-t just to get in the way of being with each other.

It's like, "You're going to the same show, you're standing 15 feet away from somebody you don't know, but they're there for the exact same rea-

"I SEE IT AS I HAVE 15 MINUTES TO PUSH BACK AT A I HAVE THIS ONE SMALL CHANCE TO LET EVERYONE

an album. It's built on a good friendship, and some people may think that's lame, but I think that's the best way to create anything.

It's when there's some kind of bond to hold it together deeper than just what you're going to hear or what you're going to see. I would encourage any band to listen to what he does or work with him, because he's good. He's going to be great. He's going to do good things in the future.

You talked about things going deeper, and what I admire about you personally is not being afraid to touch on subjects and talk about things nobody really talks about. On your last record, you talked about racism and bigotry, and on this record you talked

is..." I'd never heard stuff like that. I'd never heard people talk about real life problems, out of just, "Oh, man, my girlfriend left me," or, "You're a backstabber, you're going to get what you deserve." It was real deal sh-t, and whenever I became the vocalist of this band, I remember telling the guys that if I could help it, I never wanted to write about anything that didn't mean something.

I see it as I have 15 minutes to push back at a world that's been pushing me for 22 years. I have this one small chance to let everybody know exactly where I'm coming from, exactly what I'm about, exactly what our whole band is about and where our whole band comes from. To not take that by the horns and take full advantage of that opportunity would be, in my

everything to me.

You said that you have 15 minutes on the stage to talk about where you're coming from, and came from, and where the band comes from. Talk about that for a minute. Where do you come from?

Like me personally?

Yeah. The stories behind the songs, like behind the song you guys always do that kids just go crazy for. It's about racism, and how you talk about...

Oh, yeah.

That song is very impactful to a lot of kids because you say no matter what you are — black, brown, yellow, straight edge, Christian

son you are." But you choose to treat them differently because they aren't straight edge or because they are straight edge or because they might be black or they might be Hispanic? Whatever. It's like going back to the whole 15 minute thing: I have that microphone in my hand, and that's something that bothered me, and it's something I wanted to bring to people's attention. It's not just at shows. It's very evident nationwide; I firmly believe that racism is deeply ingrained.

Prejudice in general is deeply ingrained into human beings. I feel like, in some ways, it's a survival mechanism, but at the same time I don't see the purpose of it anymore. We don't need to have separate groups so much anymore. We don't need to

have clans and tribes and sh-t. We're all, for the most part, part of the same group.

We're pretty integrated, so to let the color of somebody's skin interfere with how you view the human race, I feel like that's pretty bothersome. It's always bothered me because I'm mixed. I'm half white and half Filipino, and I grew up in an all white family. There were a lot of places I would go within my own family where I was met with a little bit of — I don't necessarily mean hatred, but was met with misunderstanding, and that hurt.

It's something they didn't understand, that misunderstanding me

that 10 seconds.

The whole album itself, everything takes place in a house. Everything was written in the same sense as a concept album, not so much as everything lyrically, but each song takes place in a different room of my house. Whether people realize it or not — and that's the thing; it's all the stuff I grew up with. Everything you grow up with is a different room. It's a different doorway you open up, and you don't know what you're going to see when you go through it. For instance, "Dropping Plates" is about waiting tables, and how I'll be the first to tell you I'm thankful to have a job. I don't want that to be misconstrued that I

your heart out about all the shit that pisses you off, and you're perched.

It brings you together. It brings other people together. It's a beautiful thing. I don't really know if I answered that question too well, but I kind of go off on tangents.

I remember when you guys came out with "The Guilty Dog" a year and a half, two years ago. There is a story behind that, and one line that... I don't know if I can remember the exact words, but you're basically telling God to eff off.

With that, I'm guessing it's the line that says, "God, if you're up there,

feeling you have is a double-edged sword. As much as I prayed to God and hoped He would send me down someone who is actually going to care about me, at the same time, who gives a fuck. I'm one person. I'm one of billions on this planet; why the f-ck should my problems have to wait for anybody else just because they're my problems? That whole song is just back and forth. The whole thing takes place in my head as far as how I feel, and I'm sure there are people who are going to listen to that be like, "Oh, man, what a bummer. They're a band that bashes God."

But I want to tell them that's not the case. I hope to, one day without a

A WORLD THAT'S BEEN PUSHING ME FOR 22 YEARS. EVERYBODY KNOW EXACTLY WHERE I'M COMING FROM."

was the most hurtful thing they could have done. I'd hate to see that happen to anybody else — and I don't necessarily try and prevent it with other people — but I want to open people's eyes to it, at least. Because it's not worth it. It's really not worth tearing others down.

What kind of issues did you want to bring to the table this time around?

It's all little pieces of my life that I've wanted to talk about. The second song, "Come Out of Your Room," is literally about... The whole song is written about a 10- to 15-second span of time when I walked in on my mother's suicide attempt. It relays everything I felt, everything I thought, everything I tried not to feel within

was ever bitter at the fact that I had a job. That would be really ignorant of me. But I am bitter at the fact that I had to do it with assholes all day, that I wasn't seen as a person, I was seen as somebody's servant.

Everything is an outlet, and I feel like that's the perfect place for music. It's all the stuff you can't say on a regular basis. The stuff I wish I would've said to my boss. The stuff I wish I would've said to my customers.

I'm able to say it there and be 100 percent listened to. It's not falling on deaf ears, for the most part, and those kids come out to that show to see us. They're there to hear what we have to say, and that's a beautiful thing. It's mind blowing to be able to go into a room full of strangers and scream. You just go out there and you just yell

send me down someone who gives a f-ck." It's written as one person saying it. I remember thinking it to myself. I remember the exact situation I was in on the day when I thought that.

I never, ever thought I would put that into a song, but I remember thinking that in the back of my head and my face went hot. I was tired of getting pushed around by the people that were supposed to love me. I was tired of never getting listened to, never getting a chance that I thought that I deserved, especially as far as my right to having a happy life.

But if you listen to it in the song, Nolan is saying the first part: "God, if you're up there, send me down someone who..." Then I say, "...gives a f-ck," because, at the same time, it's everything. Every situation, every

video or even just to type it out, and break down each song and explain to people exactly what I thought. Nobody's even asked for it, but I need to get it off my chest, as well as everybody in my band wanting to get out there what (Kublai Khan) is about, to give people better insight to exactly where were coming from.

That's the line that kids remember at shows. That's the line, so far, that has stood out the most. I feel like if that's the case, I feel like for some of those kids it may just be a fun thing to yell at the top of their lungs on Saturday night whenever they're out of school or whatever. But I feel like for the other half of those kids, that's how they feel.

I felt like that. I feel like everybody, at some point in their life, has felt like

“A LOT OF THOSE CHRISTIAN BANDS THAT ARE FRIENDS ARE ACCEPTING OF US, AND I FEEL LIKE THAT IS THE ACCEPTING OF OTHERS WHO AREN'T NECESSARILY EX-

that, whether they want to acknowledge it or not. I couldn't keep it in. It's a pretty vulgar way to go about it, but at the same time, sometimes the only way to be listened to is to be vulgar.

The funny thing is, that one line is answered with your good friends like the guys in Gideon. I like that you guys are really embraced by the Christian metalcore community and to see other people that actually care about Kublai Khan, and have wanted to see Kublai Khan be something. Even for you, how does that feel to have those kind of people back you guys?

It's a good feeling. The guys in both Gideon and Leaders are some of our really, really good friends. There have also been plenty of Christian bands who have spoken up about how they feel about us. There have been a couple of dates on tours where we're playing churches, and we're not allowed to play. I remember one of the times we played, they were nice enough to let us set up merch and that was about it. We have been met with both sides, but the love far outweighs the hate as far as the Christian community, especially with the bands. Not necessarily with individuals. That's the thing with Daniel. I remember he was one of the first people ever to take notice or give a sh-t about anything we did.

At the same time, I guess it could be said, "God, if you're up there, send me down someone who gives a f-ck," and he gave a f-ck. Other people started giving a f-ck, and I feel like if you scream loud enough, eventually somebody's going to hear you. A lot of those Christian bands that are friends with us, they've never once judged us. They've never once said, "Hey, you guys need to think about this or do that." They are accepting of us, and I feel like that is the most Christian thing you can do, to be accepting of others who aren't necessarily exactly like you. That gives me a lot of faith. It gives me a lot of hope, not just in the Christian community, but to myself and other people in general.

I know the Christian community is met with a whole lot of prejudice and a whole lot of misunderstanding. Don't get me wrong; I grew up in the Bible belt. I grew up in the Catholic church. I've seen a lot of stuff. I've been told a lot of stuff. The only people that really understand what we're going through, the other people out there grinding, they see past any issues, they accept us and we accept them. We've never once told them that, "Hey, you guys maybe shouldn't be a Christian band," because every man is his own man, and I feel like every band is their own band. However you want to do it, do it.

I feel like that's the beauty of music,

being able to go against the grain and say exactly what you want to say without being completely judged for it. There are going to be the people who do judge you for it, but it's just good to know that on both sides of the spectrum, both secular and non secular bands have supported us over the years. It really does a lot for morale.

You guys have (a solid following), but you guys are just putting out your first record on a label. That doesn't happen because people hate you, it happens because people love you, and Kublai Khan has been able to get fans from all over. Do you know why that (is)?

To be honest with you, I don't. The only thing I can think of is just love and respect. You don't go to another man's house and eat out of his fridge before you introduce yourself. It's the same kind of thing at these shows. We didn't necessarily tiptoe around, but everywhere we went, we tried to let people know that we are there with an air of respect.

I thank whoever came out for allowing us into their home. We're guests. We come from a little Podunk town, that's our town. We don't live in these major cities. We don't come from the same place as a lot of these kids, but I feel like, at the same time, that shouldn't separate us.

Everybody who has ever come up

and talked to us or watched our band, f-ck, I try and tell them thank you — and a genuine thank you — because it doesn't happen all the time. The fact that anybody cares about what we're up there doing, in my opinion, is a complete milestone for us, because the rest of the world doesn't care. Outside of the walls of those venues, nobody really probably cares what we're doing or what we talk about. Those people that give you the time of day, you got to hold them close. You have to show them respect, because they're worthy of respect. They're not there to spit in your face and tell you how crappy you are. If they come out to see you, and they legitimately want to see you, you should never, ever, ever, ever take that for granted.

You should always be thankful for that because it has a shelf life. I have no thoughts in my mind that this band is going to last forever or that we're ever going to be metalcore legends. I'm trying to love everybody I can in the time I'm given, and the rest of my band is, too. We're just trying to live in the moment and understand what we are there for, and be thankful for the people who really do care about us. It helps a lot in everyday life. It makes me thankful to be alive. It helps us really want to keep going with our day and with this band in general. The fact that if it's a hardcore kid or a metalcore kid or anybody

BANDS WITH US, THEY'VE NEVER ONCE JUDGED US. THEY DO THE MOST CHRISTIAN THING YOU CAN DO, TO BE EXACTLY LIKE YOU. THAT GIVES ME A LOT OF FAITH."

straightedge, not straightedge — we embrace them with open arms because we would literally be going against everything we preach about on stage if we did. Music should never be for a select few. It should never be for the elite. If they don't like it, that's awesome, thanks for giving us a shot. If you do like it, f-cking come on the ride with us. It'll probably be a fun couple years.

What is the scene doing right, and what are we doing wrong?

I think I'll go with the positives first, because I know that so many people are so quick to point out the negatives. If you look around, the positives are the fact that people come out, the fact that people find themselves, they find a place where they belong. That positive alone I feel like completely outweighs any negatives. The fact that there's a whole bunch of great bands out right now, the fact that kids, for the most part, support you and they'll give you their left leg if they you're in trouble. It's a beautiful thing, because at the end of the day, a lot of those people are complete strangers, they only know what they hear about you and what they see, so it's a really humbling feeling, the love that can be shown with that.

As for the negatives — there's always going to be negatives — but

some of the negatives we've seen, there's always going to be violence. We're a heavy band, but we don't necessarily want violent things to happen; they just kind of do, sometimes, at shows.

If it's all in good fun, if people are out there f-cking banging their heads in, like do it. As long as you're not insanely critically hurting other people or ruining the show for other people, then f-cking go for it.

Like that Festival in Ohio.

I heard about that. That's a shame that had to turn out like that. I'm sure there were people there that just wanted to just enjoy the show, but I don't know too much information about that. I just heard there was a stabbing or a shooting or something.

Both. There was both.

It's tragic that it happens. It gets tied with the music, they become one. People feel that violence and heavy music are a couple. I think there's a difference between violence and energy. We've played plenty of shows where there's a whole lot of both. We've also played shows where there's none of both.

It's a toss-up. It's a gamble. Different cities do it differently, and like I said, as long as people aren't getting their necks broken and sh-t, have fun. You want me to keep going

with the negatives, or is that probably good?

Whatever you want to point out.

One other negative that really bothers me is something — I feel like I'm not at liberty to tell people, "Hey, this is wrong," but I feel that it is wrong — but it just sucks when bands don't support other bands, especially when they're in the same scene. In other towns, you see so much drama between bands, and it's all like, "Literally, you play 10 minutes apart from each other."

I know that doesn't make you friends. I know that doesn't make you the same people or that you have the same values or morals or anything. But it's rough whenever everybody's living in a fishbowl. The world is such a large place that I feel like sometimes bands and people in the scene don't realize how small it actually is what most of us are doing.

Not all of us, but a good percentage of bands that are starting out or up and coming, they get a chip on their shoulder and the feel like they can do it alone, that they don't need anybody. That they can treat people however they want, and talk to whoever they want, trash any band they want. It's your right as an American to do that. Freedom of speech, you say whatever the f-ck you want, but at the same time, should be held accountable.

I've seen plenty of bands talk sh-t on

promoters, other bands, the scene, the kids. Especially kids that even come out to see them, and then they wonder, "Why the f-ck can't we get booked here? Why the f-ck don't we have a turnout? Why are people not coming out to see us? Why aren't these bands letting us borrow their rigs?"

Because you're not showing respect, man. We're all f-cking here. We're all losing sh-t to do this. You're not the only one out there. It's kind of a bummer. It's rough to see bands go at each other's throats. It's rough to see kids go at bands' throats. It's just the name of the game. I know that it's going to happen, but it doesn't take the sting off any less.

That's just something we try to encourage through our experience at shows. It's really not that hard to just be nice. Being nice, it can get you far. Honestly, it can do a lot for you. It can really help your situation as a person (or) as a band. I would just encourage people in the scene to just slow the f-ck down a little bit. Take a breath. It's music. It's not World War III.

I very much appreciate your time.

Dude, no problem. I'm glad you even f-cking bothered to hit us up about it, man. It means a lot dude.

†

Houston is in charge of Special Projects for HM.

REIN VIBE
MISS MAY

BY JUSTIN MABEE PHOTOS BY TRAVIS SHINN

A photograph of two men standing in front of a wall made of vertical wooden planks. The man on the left has dark hair and a beard, wearing a black jacket. The man on the right is wearing a grey beanie, a nose ring, and a black jacket. The overall tone is gritty and industrial.

NTING

AFTER THEIR FOURTH STUDIO RELEASE, 'RISE OF THE LION,' MISS MAY I VOCALIST LEVI BENTON HAS ONE MAJOR CONCERN: SOUNDING TOO MUCH LIKE MISS MAY I. HE'S OUT TO SET THAT RECORD STRAIGHT.

Two years ago, around the release of Miss May I's breakout recording *At Heart*, HM Magazine sat down with vocalist Levi Benton for a typical interview about a new record. At the time, Benton had recently become a self-proclaimed Christian, and he and his girlfriend had been together for five years, followed by a three-month fight and break-up, which led to much of what we heard on *At Heart*.

Back then, Benton was short but candid that his faith had changed much of how he looked at the world, quoted as saying, "The way my faith affects me and the way that I put it in my life doesn't have anything to do with fronting a band."

Now, with Miss May I's fourth studio release, *Rise of the Lion*, in the public's hands, we caught up with the Cincinnati native to talk about the now immensely-popular band and the meanings behind their new record.

Catching up on the last two years since we spoke, the singer was focused and laid back. True to his word, Benton's faith is still an integral part of who he is, but that doesn't necessarily bleed into the band. "We try to keep it out of our conversations because they're not into it," Benton said. "They're the polar opposite, in fact, so we don't bring it up at all. But they're not judgmental about it."

When you're the only believer in a band, it can change how fans and audiences see you, especially when Miss May I's fan base has grown exponentially since 2010's groundbreaking *Monument*. While on tour, the frontman has had the chance to meet tons of fans and get to speak to them about his faith. "It's been cool," he said confidently. "I'm still the only Christian in the band, but I've met some pretty cool Christians on tour. I've never met anyone..." He changes

course: "People are just super cool about it. I try to be as normal of a dude as possible."

Besides being on tour, Benton pulled back the curtain a little to talk about his personal life. Some important things have been happening outside of his full-time job. "I got married, and my wife has been my strong point," he said, referring to his then-girlfriend now-wife whose break-up resulted in an inspired album. "She's definitely the main reason (I'm a Christian). I was a very bad person before I met her. She definitely changed everything. We're still kids. I can't imagine seven years ago how much of a bad kid I was. My little brothers are that age, and I'm like 'When I was your age, I was a piece of crap.'"

After some laughter about the things we would never attempt again, he continued: "I have a shop now at home, and even when we're off tour, I'm sitting at the shop all the time, even though fans are always in there and coming in. It's like my night job, and I try to think of it that way, too. It's not my whole life; I try hard not to let it become that."

The shop Benton is referring to is Vursa Unlimited, a boutique clothing store on the campus of the University of Cincinnati. He and his wife opened the doors in October 2013. "When I'm on tour, my wife is there every day, and when I get back, those are her days off. So I never stop working." I hadn't heard of it, so I prodded him a little more. "We don't have any employees yet, but we will be looking soon. It's cool that it's on campus, too, so we get to go to all the concerts and sporting events. I'm part of their community now. I'm even on the City Council at University of Cincinnati."

I took a second. "You're on the City

Council?" I asked. "It's hilarious," Benton laughed. "I'm a tattooed, long-haired band guy. And I'm on the city council and a bunch of communities to help the city get better. Everyone's wearing suits, and I come in with tattoos and long hair. I'm weird, but it's fun. I just look at these guys in suits, and I'm like, 'Dude, I've traveled the world. You can suck it.' They're always looking at me with disdain."

Probably the coolest thing about Vursa Unlimited besides the name (Benton purposely made it up), is that Benton and his team at the store design every article of clothing they sell. "It's all urban. I design everything. It's all positive, ambitious and dream-filled. The whole thing is based in positivity. We do jeans all the way up to big, thick jackets. Everything but footwear."

I asked Benton about their relationship with Rise Records. The band has been signed to the label since 2008, and recently resigned for the new album. "They've been like family, ever since our first record," he said. "They let us finish school, and they were cool about it. There was no pressure, and they've always believed in us. They have a good family vibe, since we worked with them back when they were in a little office. Now, they've got a whole floor of a building and they're killing it. It's cool to grow up with them."

The band had the chance to leave Rise behind and follow the DIY model, but ultimately came back because of their loyalty. "We met with a lot of people," Benton said. "At the end of the day, we don't like the corporate vibe. We don't want to forget that we're doing this to have fun. For

(Rise), it's still a bunch of dudes just hanging out."

The cover and album concept was designed by Levi, and it was the band's idea to run a Facebook contest, where one (lucky?) fan would get to have the lion logo tattooed on his back for the cover. "We'd been seeing the symbol a lot, and I made this whole artwork and album concept, so we ran this competition. We had, like, thousands of entries, narrowed it down to 500, then to 50. We flew the guy out to Los Angeles where we filmed the video for "Gone," paid for the tattoo and hung out with him all day. It was super fun."

Benton's songwriting has matured on *Rise of the Lion*, and his vocal style has evolved as well. The songs give off a more focused metal sound, compared to the metalcore heard on *Monument* and *At Heart*. "The biggest reason for that, is we're pretty much in the position — since we did the transition record last — to go for it and do the whole thing. I feel like where we were at, we sort of had to go with the times. We couldn't be ourselves yet, so we were still tapping our influences. But we weren't going for it yet." Those moments were certainly heard on a record like *At Heart*. "When we released it, it started opening doors for us to do that. Since it was so well accepted, we went all out (this time) and let our influences show."

Benton also dives into the diversity on *Rise of the Lion*, a mature showing on the band's part as they find their own lane. "That's where a lot of different vocal styles and guitar solos came in," he said, referring to the songs on *ROTL*. We wanted to make a really diverse record, not just a continuation. This is the first time, I feel, we've ever wrote a (truly) diverse record.









All our records are pretty much thrashing and heavy the whole time. This is the first one where not two songs sound alike.”

The production value this time around was up a notch, done by Terry Date (Pantera, Slipknot, White Zombie, Deftones). “We’re definitely the smallest band he’s done, and it was pretty exciting for us,” he said. “He’s pretty crazy. We did a lot of things differently (because of him). He was hands off, let the band sound like the band — not his rendition of the band. That was exciting because we’ve never had that opportunity. When he was hands on, it was the smallest of things, but they are almost like great Easter eggs in the record. It was awesome.” In response to the title, *Rise of the Lion*, Benton credits the fans. “The lion in the title stands for us and our fans, how they’re both getting bigger and bigger. Since all the lyrics are fan-based on this record and the cover is fan-based, we figured it’s going to make this lion thing get even bigger. It was a proper title.”

Production-wise, things were different this time around and not just because Date was producing. “We had a lot more time to work on the record. We rewrote songs; we were able to tweak things. We messed with tabs more. Everything was real again, like our last record. Terry had us in different stations and we were constantly working. There was never a day (in two months) that somebody wasn’t working on the record.”

According to Benton, the mission of Miss May I is to have fun, first and foremost. “You never work a day in your life, and you’re always having

fun. It’s us doing something we love to do. We got lucky it’s a career for us. But at the end of the day ... I want to be one of the legendary metal bands. I want people to remember us. When I’m 30 and I go to a bar and let people know what band I was in, I want them to still think it’s cool. I feel our hype faded out a couple years ago, so we’re just this band.”

I had to take a second. “You feel like your hype faded out?”

“Yeah, I feel like it’s faded out and we’re not that fresh band anymore,” Benton confirmed. “We’re Miss May I. When they hear that name, people know what we sound like. They’re fans because they like our band. People like us because they’re fans, not because Hot Topic tells them to or a certain magazine tells them to. I think it’s mainly because we stuck with it. We didn’t go with the fads. When bands go with the fad, people go with the fad, but then the fad dies out and your band dies out. We’ve been playing the same thrashy metal music since we were 15-years old in a basement. Same dudes, playing bigger stages, a lot more crap and a lot louder.”

Despite thinking the hype is gone, Miss May I is gearing up for a big album release. The collective movement of the Internet is on the verge of hyping it beyond any barometer Miss May I had previously set — with good reason. And while they might not think so, the band is developing into a household name — with good reason.

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Mabee is a Staff Writer for HM.

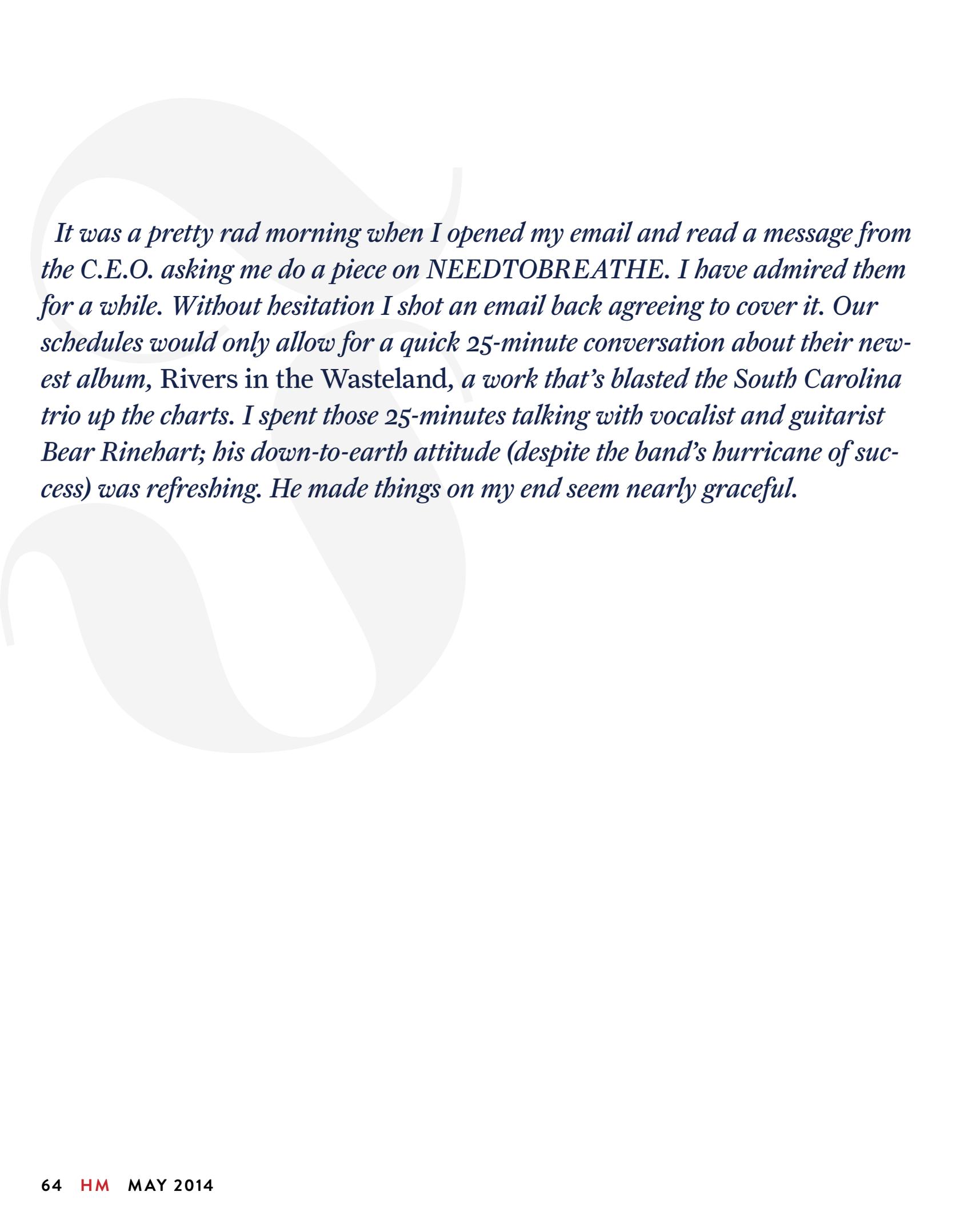
A man with a beard, wearing a white hat with a dark band and a dark jacket, is shown in profile, looking towards the left. He is standing in a field of tall, dark, rectangular stone pillars. The background shows a line of trees under a cloudy sky.

DOWN IN THE RIVERS TO PRAY

In their most biographical album to date, **NEEDTOBREATHE** strips down their sound, goes back to the basics to tell their story

By Chelc Eaves | Photos by Sully Sullivan





It was a pretty rad morning when I opened my email and read a message from the C.E.O. asking me to do a piece on NEEDTOBREATHE. I have admired them for a while. Without hesitation I shot an email back agreeing to cover it. Our schedules would only allow for a quick 25-minute conversation about their newest album, Rivers in the Wasteland, a work that's blasted the South Carolina trio up the charts. I spent those 25-minutes talking with vocalist and guitarist Bear Rinehart; his down-to-earth attitude (despite the band's hurricane of success) was refreshing. He made things on my end seem nearly graceful.



HM: I noticed on your website it says that your brothers are from Possum Kingdom, South Carolina. Can you tell us what Possum Kingdom is like?

Bear Rinehart: It's in the middle of nowhere, for sure. It's a town that nobody's ever heard of. It's about 150 people, maybe. One country store; we called it and it was named The Country Store. One stop sign. No traffic lights. A really amazing place to grow up.

My dad ran a church camp, so we had the run of the place most of the winter. In the summer, a bunch of kids would come in from all over the state for the summer for like a week of camp at a time.

We sort of felt like we owned the place when we were there, which was a great place to be. Just kind of wild and a little bit of a redneck upbringing, I guess. It was a lot of fun.

I'm from a small town, as well, so I know what you mean. You can basically walk across the town. It's so small. What things will fans not expect from this album?

I don't know. If you've been a fan of our band for a long time, you start to expect every record to be different. I think this record certainly is different. If you just came along on the last record, the big difference between the last record and this one is we really stripped it down a lot.

On the last record, on *The Reckoning*, we intentionally tried to make it a big production. We went in saying we were going to do anything we wanted. We didn't give ourselves any limits. We put all kinds of horns on songs, big production, extra drum kits and all kind of things.

This record was really about stripping it down to just the band and doing live takes. We recorded a lot of this record to tape. We just got a room together and tried to keep it as simple as possible, I think, to reflect where we were as a band.

The title, *Rivers in the Wasteland*, is about what the band was going through at the time. It really felt like we had been whittled down to some-

thing, and something was happening in us. Something hopeful was happening in us but it was coming out of nothing. We had been broken down into nothing first.

That's really what happened to the music, I think. It's getting back to the things that we loved about it, and getting very simple.

Is it true that 90 percent of the new album was recorded in live takes?

Yeah, I think that was certainly the intention. When I listen back to the record, it has that feeling. We wanted to limit ourselves to that because we felt like a lot of times our songs got better once we got out on the road, I





“We all wore dresses because we played a song called ‘A Girl Named Tennessee’ as a joke. It was Halloween. It was an awkward moment.”

— BEAR RINEHART

think, because when you're playing for other people you put this extra pressure on yourself.

A lot of times, we would work on the song the night before we went in to play a show. Even sound check. It was like, "This song got 10 times better." Rather than when you're making a record, you have this artistic thing you're trying to say and whatever (*laughs*). A lot of that stuff might get in the way, as opposed to 'we're about to play this in front of people.'

We better whittle this down to exactly what we want to say and exactly what we want to come across. I think that's what we were trying to do here. Let's get all the complicated things out of the way, and let's just get the emotion across we're trying to convey. What are the important things we're trying to say in the music and in the lyrics? Concentrate on those things. I think that's what it's starting to feel like.

What are some sources of inspiration the band draws from?

All over the place. In the past, we would have said anything from our experiences and the things we see, and other music, film... Those kind of things. I think it's obvious we mostly drew inspiration from our own lives and our own experience (on this record). This is a very

biographical kind of record. It takes place over a period of a year's time. It took about a year to make the record, and I think you can really see that. The record goes in that order, starting at the first track, "Wasteland." Going through, it feels like the record grows in a hopefulness as it goes. That's really how our experience was. I don't think we knew that starting out.

That's the funny thing about going on a journey: You don't know how it's going to end, and I think that was the way this was musically for us. We started out in the dark (*laughs*), and, looking back, it was obvious we were headed somewhere at the beginning. We just weren't clued into where it was.

There was a moment after recording *The Reckoning* where you guys thought the band was over. What advice could you give other musicians who lose faith in what they're doing?

It may be different for some bands, but I do think ... the worst thing you can do is to start worrying about the outcome of what you're doing. Somehow you've flipped priorities to becoming concerned with the success of what you're doing or to how it affects people, even. We're given certain talents, and we're supposed to give them up, I think. We don't own

them. When we started feeling like they were ours is where things started going poorly.

You start to concern yourself with, "Oh, how is the audience taking this? Why aren't they taking it better? Why don't they enjoy this part? Why don't we try to get them to like this? Why can't we be a bigger band in this way?" All those questions.

Really, you stop concerning yourself with how much you appreciate the other guys in the band and you appreciate the blessing it is to be able to make music and do the thing that you love, which really is the only thing you really should focus on.

Immediately after we started doing that again, the other things just fell into place. You loosen up your grip a little bit, and all of a sudden inspiration comes back.

Do you have any personal favorites on the new album?

Yeah, I think "Wasteland" is one of my favorite songs on the record. It really paints a good picture of where we were and where we were headed. I really love the image of how it starts the record. It's a dark place, but also it leaves a little glimmer. It says that, "In this wasteland where I'm living, there is a crack in the door filled with light, and it's all I need to get by." I think that's a good image for what is about

to happen on the record, and I love that track.

There are a bunch of songs on there I think are going to be great songs to play live. I think about that.

"Difference Maker" has only been playing for that last couple of years. I think that really connects with people because that song is almost an argument with itself about what it means to be a difference maker.

That was important for us to figure out when we first started writing that song. I'm not sure we knew what it meant. We knew what it wasn't. It took us until the end of the record to really figure out what it was. What that was, or the answer, was being available. Showing up was what being a difference maker was.

It wasn't having the right answers. It wasn't acting as if we had picked the right way to go, or for some reason we needed people to listen to us. It was just the fact that we had this thing that was given to us and we were supposed to offer it up.

If there's one thing you want your listeners to take away from the new album what would that be?

I think that we're so appreciative of what we get to do, and that this feels like Day One to us. *Rivers in the Wasteland* comes from a verse in the Bible, from Jeremiah. That river in the

“The worst thing you can do is to start worrying about the outcome of what you’re doing.”

— BEAR RINEHART

dark place can’t come from us. That huge difference between that desert and that river — that freshness that you feel, those things — really comes from your worst place.

The hope that comes out of that is what we want people to see in this record. The turnaround, the example of that, I guess, is what we really want people to feel on this record.

You guys spent two years on the road supporting your last album. Are you ready to pick up another two on the road?

Yeah, I think we are. We took off for about six weeks. We were going through a huge struggle right before this record. It was getting finished; we were working on it. We really had to look at ourselves and decide if we wanted to keep doing this. A lot of (the writing) was directed to that.

Those weeks were hugely refreshing for us. I think we’re all ready to go now. We all can’t wait to get out there and play it.

The *Rivers in the Wasteland* tour begins in a couple of weeks. What should your fans expect from this tour that the band didn’t have on the past tours?

It’s going to be a different thing because we’re looking at this in a different way than we had been in the last several years. Our excitement for

this tour is at a different level, and our appreciation for each other is probably higher than it has been since we started. We feel like it’s the first day of being in a band together again. It has really felt like that. If you’re coming to see the band and you’ve seen us a bunch of times, I think you’ll feel that freshness.

Off the top of your head, can you tell us what has been your favorite show to perform?

For us, the dream always was to play at the Rhineland. I think, growing up, that we were country kids, so to play at the Rhineland was something that we thought was beyond us forever. I still think the first time we sold out the Rhineland, probably. Just walking on the stage was enough for us. Even if we had played all the wrong notes and it had been awful, I think that was just enough that that happened. That probably took the cake for us at the time.

I felt the same way, I remember, when we sold out our hometown club. We used to play this place called The Handlebar in Greenville, South Carolina. That’s where we used to go see shows when we were kids. The first time that place sold out, we all looked at each other like, “This could happen.” We felt like we had made it. We felt like there was no bigger thing you could do.

Those kinds of moments are what keep bands together. That stuff still happens, which is great. It makes you feel like a kid.

Every band has things they do on the road to pass time. How do you keep yourself entertained on the road?

We compete with each other in almost anything. We make up games to compete with each other. We’re brothers in a band. It can be the dumbest bus games or any kind of sports. It just gets ridiculous.

We have to have referees if we’re going to play board games. It’s that bad. That’s us. That’s why we keep ourselves busy. Anything that has a winner, we want to play it.

In February, you guys performed “The Heart” on “Conan.” Can you tell us what that was like?

It was cool. The first time we played “Conan” was about a year or two ago for Halloween. We all wore dresses because we played a song called “A Girl Named Tennessee” as a joke. It was Halloween so we had to dress up. I don’t know whose idea that was or how that ended up happening. It was an awkward moment. We didn’t know how that was going to go. You tape the show in the middle of the afternoon and then it doesn’t play until that evening, so

you’re waiting to get the call from your mom to see if it was funny or if she thought it was horribly embarrassing.

This time it was totally chill. It was really good. They remembered us. The makeup people all wanted to take our pictures not wearing wigs. It was a lot of fun. I thought it went really well.

Lastly, if fans wanted to help you out in any way, what could they do?

To me, tell their friends about our band. We’re involved with an organization called PMI. It’s probably the most important thing we do as a band, I think. It’s Palmetto Medical Initiative, and we do all kinds of stuff (with them). Every ticket you buy to come to a NEEDTOBREATHE concert, a dollar of that ticket goes to PMI.

It’s an organization that does medical clinics in Africa and Nicaragua. I’ve been to Africa with them before. If you go to their website (*Editor’s note: palmettomedical.org*), there are a bunch of ways to get involved. We do golf tournament to help. It means a lot to us, so if fans wanted to help us, that’s a good way to do it.

Other than that, tell your friends and family about our band. We’d love to see you out there.

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'I called from my
vehicle, because
the quietest place
my life right now

Rob Houston talks to Tedashii,
the verbal force behind one of the
many heady hip-hop artists that also

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share a passion for Christ. Their lives move at the speed of their flow, and Tedashii is stopping to smell the roses.

Every hip-hop star has a great stage name, though few are born with it: Kanye, Usber, Lauryn Hill. As if to live up to the originality in his name, the hip-hop artist Tedashii, one of Reach Records' top emcees, is a master at his craft. He understands the art of storytelling, and he's got material. Below Paradise is Tedashii's life from last year. After losing his son, he eventually reinvigorated a new fervor for his art, his new therapy, a way to spit out the slew of emotions he had inside. Now, after his latest release, he's rebuilding his life on the road, and he needs your support.

HM: How are you doing this morning?

Tedashii: I'm doing well, thank you. I'm good.

For the people who don't know, tell them who you are and where you're from.

My name is Tedashii. That's actually my real name. My birth name is just odd enough that I can actually use it as a stage name as well, so that's what I do. I'm from the Houston, Texas area. I was born in East Texas and I currently actually live in the DFW Metroplex.

You have your fourth solo record coming out this month?

Yeah. Fourth studio album.

The last record, *Blacklight* came out in 2011, and now it's 2014. Talk about why it took so long between records.

Blacklight came out in May of 2011 and I was able to promote it, tour and then the beginning of 2012 start doing the same thing again because it was only like a half a year. The plan was for a full year of promotion and stuff like that, but then that Fall I was

about to do another tour. That delayed the album and recording. Then I was about to go on another tour in the winter, and that's when it got delayed again. Then in March of 2013, after that winter tour, my one-year-old son passed, and that just put life on hold — not just music — but everything that was me and my family was delayed.

How long did it take you to mentally get yourself prepared to finally pick up a pen and start writing again?

I guess, in a sense, I never really put the pen down, but — for the sake of album, recording, being a recording artist again — probably around June or July of that year, about three months. There was always a burden to express myself in some way; either I'm writing stuff on a pad or I'm typing stuff in my notes on my phone. I'm doing something to create for myself a lane to just be expressive.

Somewhere around July of 2013, I started writing again with an album in mind, trying to focus on how I can live in the new normal, with the old normal disappearing with my son's passing. That's kind of what happened. I started picking up the pen and writing what was in my heart. Whatever was in my heart, I was writing.

The new record's called *Below Paradise*. What does that mean to you, when you were writing that and now that this record's about to drop?

Below Paradise, to me, means that I am currently residing... My current state is below, what I would call, paradise. If life after death is eternal, if Heaven is there — and I believe it is — then the perfection and enjoyment of God and Heaven are, in a gigantic, enormous way, overshadowing and outweighing any pleasure or any excitement that could be had on this earth. Furthermore, the pain that's felt in this world, and the grief, and the disappointment, and the heartbreak that happens in this world, according to the Scriptures, don't exist in Paradise, with the Lord.

There's a hope that I have, that I wanted to share and express, but there's also a reality we have that I wanted to highlight and bring more awareness to. I didn't want to pretend like there were no bad things.

I think that's the way people enjoy it. They enjoy the happy endings. The movie ends, the guy doesn't get the girl, and people feel let down. I'm like, in reality, that's true. Divorce is real. Breakups are real. High school sweethearts don't get married and sometimes when they do, they still get divorced. Parents don't get married, they just have kids. Kids don't have fathers.

On and on, the list goes, of heartache and pain, from a family perspective. Then you get to senseless pain, where you lose a loved one. Or so and so's in an accident. Or, what? They have cancer now? There are these realities we shield ourselves from, hoping that if we blind ourselves to them enough, they won't come our way. Then they do, and you have to learn how to face them, deal with them, and exist with it.

For the rest of my life, I'll walk with a limp. There will be an absence. Even though God is faithful and fulfilling, there'll be an absence. I can't ignore that reality, of where we are, so that's why I called it *Below Paradise*.

How long did it take you to finish this record?

(Laughs.)

I remember talking to Andy Mineo about his last record and how he was recording vocals in one studio, on tour. They were making beats on the road, while you guys were doing *Unashamed*. It's not like a rock record where it's done in one or two studios. Hip-hop records — today — it seems like it's tons and tons of places. Whenever you guys have time, you get in the studio and bust things out.

Man, I was all over. I was in Dallas, I was in Atlanta. Those are the two places I recorded, but I wrote in Dallas and Atlanta and Houston and California, a couple times. I was writ-

ing anywhere I was able to travel and do concerts. I typically paused and wrote while I was there, too. It was probably a good, solid six months of work, even though three months of that was probably the more intensive recording part. I knew I couldn't rush what this was.

Just imagine, you lose your leg and people still want you to deliver the mail the way you used to. You can't. Even though you can still maybe operate the vehicle, there's a learning curve. There's a handicap. There's even this emotional strain of, "I used to do it this way and now I can't," so you just have to accommodate that and try to go from there. That's kind of what I had to do.

I completely understand. I was born with cerebral palsy so I know all about being disabled.

I know every hip-hop artist has a basket full of tracks they toss aside. Why were these tracks the most important to put on the record?

I think, for me, these tracks actually communicated the passion, the heart, the focus, the desire — all those things that aided in communicating where I was in the moment, what I dealt with. It's really a journal with a goal. My goal was that this album would be a journal of my life over the last 12-to-14 months, and those tracks are the ones that communicated it the best.

I think I ended up doing probably 35, 36 tracks and had about 22, 23 that I was like, "I love these" — maybe 24 — but with that all said and done, only 14 really helped tell and express the journal in the way that I needed it to, so that's kind of what I did.

It definitely goes from a journal with the song about your son, with the love letter to your wife. It has different points that, as you said that and I think back at listening to it, I can definitely tell you've definitely accomplished that goal.

Thank you. I appreciate it. That was definitely the heart, because I know a lot what I was doing was really just — honestly, I was being true to

“Just imagine, you lose your leg and people still want you to deliver the mail the way you used to. You can’t. Even though you can still maybe operate the vehicle, there’s a learning curve. There’s a handicap. There’s even this emotional strain of, ‘I used to do it this way and now I can’t,’ so you just have to accommodate that and try to go from there. That’s kind of what I had to do.”

— TEDASHII

myself and ignoring whatever...

I love to hear feedback from people, but reviews for me will only mean so much on this one because I know it’s hard for somebody to really, fully grasp what you were doing, and what you were going through, so I appreciate the love and even the good critiques, but yeah, this one was way more personal.

When I was offered this interview, I really wanted to know your thoughts on hip-hop today compared to yesterday, because when I grew up in the ’80s, it was positive. For me, I haven’t heard a good hip-hop record this year; in the secular realm it seems that there is just garbage. My question to you is why is that?

Taking into consideration personal preference, and taking into consideration the idea of what was happening in the world, I, from a big viewpoint, like backing away, and going, “Here’s a large overview of everything I see.” I still feel like art, music, R&B, hip-hop, rock, country, whatever — these things do communicate a vantage point that comes from life in the world.

There’s a reality that’s there. Art’s always expressed — from Shakespearean plays all the way to the greatest jazz musicians — they all tried to communicate an angst or a truth when it came to life, reality and their current situation.

I listen to music and I still see that to an extent, but if music falls away from that, I feel like that’s when you get bad music. I feel like that’s when you get horrible music or just bad representations of art in any regard — in any genre. Hip-hop, specifically for me, left that to an extent.

Granted, I get it, for their world, for their life. Maybe they go to strip clubs. Maybe they frequent bars and leave intoxicated. Maybe they never knew their dad and they just expressed the frustration of, “I’ve got to sow my oats” — whatever the frustration is.

The problem is most people, when they do communicate about what’s going on in the world around them, they do it from such a selfish vantage point that you rob the world of a communal idea of art, and I think that’s what we try to do. That was definitely my goal. My goal was to have a personal take on a societal issue. Here is a societal issue. There is

pain. There is hurt. Look at the 10:00 news. Look at CNN. Go watch Fox. Go watch MSNBC. Check out any news medium, newspapers, magazines and when they’re not trying to sell you the happy ending, you get the reality.

I wanted to do the same thing from a personal vantage point and have a societal view in mind. That was my goal, so I feel like I’m still 100 percent authentically Christian on the album, and I’m still 100 percent authentically hip-hop because I get it and I understand the culture, but, at the same time, I feel like we rob people of the societal view of communicating what’s going on around us.

Not everybody goes to strip clubs, thank God. Not everybody womanizes and looks at people from a horrible vantage point like certain music kind of explains, but everybody’s going through what we’re talking about.

Everybody’s suffering in some regard, and my experience tells me if you live long enough, either you, a friend, a family member, maybe your children, when you have grandchildren, maybe their children will suffer and you’ll feel something. I’ve talked to numerous people who related to everything that’s happened to me.

Honestly, man, I’m sorry. It’s kind of a long answer, but...

It’s all good.

That’s why I think music, hip-hop specifically, might not be giving you what you’ve been looking for. ... Even though I think Drake is a womanizer to an extent — I don’t know his heart, personally. I never met him so I’m not being judgmental, but listening to his music, Drake, who is the voice of pop culture and hip-hop to an extent, his music always communicates this angst about women that a lot of people relate to.

A lot of dudes out there don’t know how to get it right and don’t have a savior who can help guide them in that, so they get with one girl in Georgia, get with another girl in Houston, another girl in Vegas, and then, before you know it, they’ve got songs about how they can’t find love and you’re like...? Everybody relates to that.

Now, is that good music? It feels like Drake is expressing what they go through, so I guess, but at some moment for me I had to give an answer. That’s the goal. That’s what I was hoping to give.

One thing I wanted to talk about is the darkness of hip-hop. It went from “Parents just don’t understand” to evil, evil, evil, man. That incident with Christ Bearer — and the crazy thing is his stage name is Christ Bearer — and for me, that was kind of mind blowing, because I had this interview with you and then what had happened with him.

I’m grieved at the sense that people feel so much pain, hurt and loneliness they resort to certain things, such as (suicide). There’s a part of me that is sad for the brother, just knowing, at some moment, you’ve just got to go, “This is it.” People reach that point, and there was no one there, no word, or insight enough to be able to pull them off that ledge, and just the way it had happened and the way God’s plan was.

Death didn’t happen, but he definitely hit this point. My first thought was, “Wow,” my second was feeling sad for him. And then the next thing was like, “Man, this is just bizarre.”

That, to me, isn’t just indicative of hip-hop, but indicative of humans. Period. Doing what we do, you get to hear a lot of the success stories, but there are many kids you meet at events, and then come back a year later, and they’re like, “Yeah, so and so is not with us anymore. He committed suicide.” It’s like, “Really?” It blows your mind that that’s where people can get to based on the influence of the enemy or their own thoughts, and it becomes the reality for so many.

(Hip-hop) was coupled with darkness for a while, whether you get into... Again, the beast that people have. There are dudes who have died for this. He got to a dark place on his own, but there are people who are like, “I want to bring bodily harm to you,” and they kill each other.

I’m not aware fully of the reasoning behind why my man would do this to himself, but my thought just goes out to the fact that, man, this is a world that needs an

answer, that needs hope, and they can’t find it in and of themselves.

How did you guys get it right? How is it that you guys are able to — like Lecrae going to the BET Awards. It finally clicked. In Christian hip-hop, it finally clicked to where the secular guys are looking at you going, “You guys aren’t a joke anymore. You guys are legit.”

Man, honestly, so when you look at anything in hip-hop that’s taken place, whether it was the beef between East Coast, West Coast, 50 and Ja Rule, if you keep going forward to the beef between Drake and Common... Wherever you’re looking, at some moment, these guys lost respect for one another and believed something else about the other.

For us, we walked into the game with no respect and people believing what they only could see from afar, or they never took a look. We’ve had — by God’s grace — opportunities to present ourselves to them and allow them to take a look, and then once there’s an interaction — I realized these are humans, these are people, who have pain and hurt, who have joys and triumph, and they kind of see the same thing and they relate.

There’s just an ability to find the commonality that then opens the door for a relationship, that’s how that happens. It’s not like they only said, “Yo man, you can really rap. We should be friends.” It’s really, “Yo man, you’re a real individual,” and that’s what people are looking for. They’re looking for genuine, truthful, real individuals who can relate to them where they are and then, in some way, be of benefit beyond the norm, because living in a world where everybody wants what you got or where everybody wants to be with you because of what you’ve got, it’s hard to find genuine sometimes.

What is the plan once this record drops? I know you guys are always on

the road, but what’s the one thing you really want to accomplish with this record?

One: I want to be able to accomplish the awareness that I spoke of earlier, people being able to be aware of the reality of this world, this life “below paradise.”

Two: I want it to be transparent and allow people into my world, and personally share where I was, and hopefully that will be of benefit.

Then, lastly, I do hope to be able to hit as many places as I can with the message of this album and really affect and cause change, man. If we could embrace the truth that there is a season to rejoice as well as a season to mourn, then we won’t be so blindsided by the mourning part. And maybe, just maybe, in the mourning we may find calls of rejoicing even in that, so that’s kind of the hope.

Do you know when you’re going to start your tour for this record so fans will know where?

I don’t have any touring info as of yet for my personal stuff. We’re still working on that, but I should have something soon, probably in the next couple of weeks. I am doing the Shed tour with TobyMac, Skillet, Crae and then some other artists that’ll be on there as well. That begins May 1.

Are you excited about doing a tour like this?

I’m super excited about it.

Because I know you’ve done tours like this before, do you like the multi-genre tours more than you like just the straight hip-hop tours?

I think I do. I like meeting new people, so there’s a joy for me whenever I get to jump on the road with our label. There’s a brotherhood there, a familiarity, and we’re family, so it’s like, “Oh, I’m back with my brothers,” so there’s no joy lost there. But it’s exciting for me to meet new people and experience what they do within this world.



Like you, being a journalist, being able to get with other guys who write, or do what you do, (guys) you say do it well. There's a certain excitement that comes from that as you begin to challenge one another, learn from one another and admire the other's abilities, so that's kind of what this will be for me.

How many new tracks are you planning on doing for this tour?

I'll definitely have two, and I may try to add a third, but we'll see. I'm not sure just yet.

Still working that whole set list out?

Still working the set list out, just knowing that I have Crae on the tour, so I want to be able to maybe include him in the set, maybe not. Plus there are some cities we'll

hit where I know artists live, so considering that, I'd love to get some cameos from different guys, but that may not be able to happen. Still thinking everything through.

Is there anything I didn't cover you would like to talk about? About the record?

I'm hoping — and I think you might be able to concur and confirm for people — I'm hoping they realize I'm not the only one doing this, I'm not the only one with this ambition and effort, but I'm just hoping to bring real music to people, man.

Who did you get to record with on this record?

I was blessed to be able to work with the brothers from the label. Everybody's so busy now, doing their thing, it's not just

a given that cats will be free to be able to work.

I got to do some stuff with Andy (Mineo). Crae is on the album, and that was, like, the Lord's grace because he was out of town forever doing other jams. I wasn't sure if he was going to be able to make it happen, but he was able to make it happen.

Then I got (to work) with Britt Nicole. She's an amazing vocalist, and honestly, I knew Britt was killing it and doing her thing, but I had no clue how many hip-hop dudes were like, "I know who that is." Like, "For real? You know Britt Nicole?" Apparently her span is far reaching.

Then there's some other guys on the album. Christon Gray is on the album, so I'm excited about the joint with him. Yeah, I got to work with some dope people.

†

REVIEWS



Miss May I drops the ‘-core,’ moves into the metal realm with ‘Lion’

The guts of Miss May I's fourth studio effort, *Rise of the Lion*, is in its groove. Having built their house on a foundation of metal-core, vocalist Levi Benton became frustrated with the

synonymous association, telling this magazine it upset him when people knew “the sound” when you mention the band's name. And so the Troy, OH guys took a concentrated effort

to write a groove metal album, and it works.

The album itself is way more Killswitch Engage than Memphis May Fire. They purposely avoided the breakdown trap that many

in the genre rely on, instead building a dynamic with melody and timing. There is a depth to the musicianship, and some significant technical work put into the parts that need it. That



Miss May I
Rise of the Lion



RISE

restraint is helpful on *Rise of the Lion*; when the beats need to blast, they're tight and metal-to-form, but when the dynamic necessitates a flowery interlude, it's done properly. The band did a wonderful job finding that balance.

As with most new endeavors, finding your sea legs is part of the process. A band must evolve, but they can't abandon who they are or their fan base. Miss May I hasn't done that, and they won't if they work album-to-album. If *Rise of the Lion* is this promising, Benton was right not to rest on his laurels. It's gutsy and can backfire, but I know one thing for sure: I'll be buying the next chapter.

— DAVID STAGG



LIV.
Be the Change



ONTHEATTACK

Whoever said “punk’s dead” has clearly not listened to Liv, a band so punk they refer to themselves as “South Bay Scums.” These California heavy-hitters recently released *Be the Change*, and it’s a solid ’90s-style, hardcore-punk collection, with hints of Call to Preserve, Seventh Star and Strengthen What Remains.

I have always been one to quickly label albums as generic, especially when it comes to punk. When I listened to *Be the Change* and then *Change the World* by

From the Eyes of Servants, for example, I hear little to no difference in the overall sound. The fact is that punk music has conformed to one universal style; there aren’t a lot of risk-takers in the genre. While punk has always been raw, fast and aggressive, the sound has had trouble evolving over the years. Liv’s album is a prime example of the fact that punk is certainly not “dead,” but in fact, it is instead the same as it always has been.

Make no mistake — I do not intend to place harsh criticism upon this album; it genuinely is an enjoyable and uplifting collection of songs. My biggest complaint is with the overall arch of the punk movement. If you are hoping to find evidence of dynamic musical talent and complex instrumentation, Liv’s not for you. On the other hand, if you have plenty of fun two-stepping in your bedroom to the sound of that punk drumbeat every 20-something hardcore kid loves? Noisy guitars that remind you why your mother insists you start wearing ear plugs? Groovy bass lines mixed with passionate exclamations? It’s okay to join in with the band, and fly the flag of an angsty punk.

— NICK SABIN



Comrades
Safekeeper



BLOOD AND INK

In the current era of

throwback-genre popularity, the emergence of grungy’90s is welcome. At one point, though, it gave way to radio rock and, what would dominate the 2000s, emo. The millennial generation spent a lot of angst-ridden years pounding Underoath, and they’re the ones making this music thrive. Russian Circles and Explosions in the Sky were hailed as champions of a new heavy instrumental genre, rooted in the spaces of emo but abandoning the frayed ends of screaming. (The heavy vocals were replaced with something no one could argue with: a weeping guitar.)

Comrades isn’t all instrumental, but they’ve forged a new way on *Safekeeper*. But vocalist and bassist Laura McElroy (whose husband, Joe, is the band’s guitarist) uses her voice more as an instrument than a performance. The effect is chilling and demanding. Add in the even-more sparse screams of drummer Ben Trussell, and Comrades have put together a fantastic journey on *Safekeeper*.

The most important characterization of the album is that if you’re into melody, immediate variation or can’t hold a stare very long, don’t buy this record. (Well, buy it to support the band, but you get the point.) It takes time to develop, and if you’re willing to put in the effort, it returns. It’s like reading a lengthy book with a good ending, working out or spending time cooking a meal at home. You don’t want to do it every night; sometimes pizza is the perfect choice. Just know that when you do give it a spin, it’s worth your time. There is complexity in their layering, and, combined with the band’s ear for musi-

cal direction, they can craft a movie scene in you head after a five-minute song. To step it up even a little more, the tracks vary enough to maintain their individuality, but maintain a cohesive power as a full set.

The band travels the country in an old Volkswagen, and if you’re east of the Mississippi, there’s a good chance they’ll be playing near you soon.

— DAVID STAGG



Various Artists
Passion: Take it All



SIXSTEPS

I hate to reduce it to this, but for a long time I’ve felt that contemporary and modern praise and worship music just mirrors Coldplay. I don’t think it’s on purpose, but it’s good work if you can get it: Win over critics, maintain integrity, sell records at Target and get hour-long specials on NBC.

So goes *Passion: Take it All*. Passion is a yearly conference and worship music event put on by Passion Conferences, and it’s an almost perfect gathering place for believers to spend time rejuvenating their spirit and awakening their soul. It’s phenomenally produced, and it’s so overwhelming both viscerally and emotionally, it melts the hardest hearts.

But if you record it and play it back? Man, it sure does look like a made-for-TV

feature event.

The good thing is that the crew behind Passion Conferences (Louie Giglio, Chris Tomlin and the Passion City Church) are the ones setting the trends for modern day worship music, and as they’ve always stayed true to their mission, their integrity is solid. They’ve been doing it for almost two decades, and the sound has morphed and adapted to any worship and pop music trend, as it should. That’s part of their success. The songwriters dedicating their efforts to the cause (e.g. Chris Tomlin) are wonderkinds of melody and know the perfect combinations of word phrasing and business-sense.

But those songwriters and the annual conference separate themselves from the modern-day “Sunday morning” church service because that mission is to lead awakening in the hearts of young adults. As they write specifically with that mentality, they don’t waver, and the model is successful. The youth’s fervor bubbles up in the family, and, well, Chris Tomlin is currently the most sung artist in the world.

The Passion crew, on a typical tour, surprisingly doesn’t carry a huge entourage with them when they perform. I saw Chris Tomlin, Louie Giglio, et. al. at Creation Northeast last year, and when Chris Tomlin kicked his set off, there were only six people on stage. Granted, Passion is a much larger event with hubris and momentum from past years and the music echoes that need. But seeing it was a confirmation of the heart; they were dedicated to being prudent with their choices, not overwhelmingly or excessively spending for the sake

of spending, knowing exactly what they needed to do while they were there, and brought what was necessary.

And then, in the next breath, they plan a \$4 million tour, visiting 20-plus cities in 15 nations.

At the end of the day, that sounds a lot like my relationship with Coldplay. They feel down to earth despite being megafamous, like they'd perform a pub in England under a pseudonym for fun. That would be easy to do if you have the resources, but it's important to remember Coldplay was always like that. And so is Passion. The problem is that it can breed a sound that starts to own you. When the expectation is to be the constant for the next generation, how do you retain artistic integrity? When does business stop and passion start?

There will always be a spot for pop music in praise and worship. In fact, religious hymns were probably the first etchings of pop. But with that crutch, the artists must work extra hard to be good for the sake of being good, not relying on a parachute to bail them out. As long as Passion keeps selling, I suppose the maxim "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But if the numbers didn't matter and the artists could perform with that same crowd but without cell phones or cameras allowed? I bet that experience would look a little different. That's how I feel when I listen to the live recordings on this record. It's great for singing in your car. It's great for a pick-me-up when you need an infectious melody to dwell on something positive. But underneath it all, as a musical endeavor, Passion gets a hall pass. Anyone who chooses to put songs on their own

records, how will you change it and make it your own? What will be your contribution to the innovation of the Christian art community?

— DAVID STAGG



I, The Current The Seeking



ON THE ATTACK

With a name like 'I, The Current,' I was expecting a full metalcore assault. There's nothing wrong with that, but when you hear a lot of it, you just hope there's some ingenuity in there. Always mind-prepping for disaster.

I was pleasantly surprised when I, The Current's record became a worthy listening venture. It started to evolve after the first track into something more Evergreen-Terrace-meets-Exposions-in-the-Sky, exploring guitar riffs and instrumental sections octaves above what today's metalcore listeners are used to. It has that other stuff, too, but when it's not every other music phrasing, it's the perfect seasoning in fashioning a full meal.

One thing that would really step up the game of this album is the band's commitment to professionalism. Throughout a number of the songs, the guitars are wildly out of tune, sometimes so dissonant you can hear it in the power chords. About the only time you get the perfect chance to make your instrument sound the way it was meant to sound is in

a studio setting; this isn't a live show or a live recording or an attempt to recreate your live show — commit to the recording and tune your instrument. It's an entry-level stop in showing the business-level mindset of the band. The small things count when someone wants to spend their money on you, all up and down the food chain: listeners, consumers, radio, labels, the people in their bedrooms who will probably never see your band live in their whole life.

The guts and beauty are here, though; the small things on *The Seeking*, like intonation, can be cleaned up. Do yourself the favor of jamming it top-to-bottom, but welcome the dissonance. And buy a ticket to see them live. It was meant to be heard that way.

— DAVID STAGG



Ethan Luck Hard Seas



INDEPENDENT

After his time with several different bands (drummer for Relient K, guitarist for Demon Hunter), photographer-turned-solo-artist Ethan Luck has provided us with his third EP of raw, rock tunes. Two EPs from 2013, *Greetings from the Garage* and *Wounds and Fears*, established a garage-punk style and solidified the kind of music we'd hear from the musician. With *Hard Seas*, Ethan has branched out a bit from the

garage, with a little more raw country, rockabilly flavor. It's still the Hunt we've come to enjoy, just more structured and mature. The songs and lyrical content tend to stick to the simpler style found on his first two EPs, and an opener like "At Least I'm Yours" sets the tone for the five tracks. According to the Bandcamp page (where you can download all of Ethan's solo music for free), the songs on *Hard Seas* came from dealing with a lot of anxiety over the past year. "Can't Sleep Sound" is a perfect example of this anxiety, and it's appropriate there's a softer moment in the middle of the instrumental bridge, acting almost as a nap for someone who can't sleep.

It's not the simplistic part that is the best thing, it's how personal an artist like Hunt can be with this EP. Songs like "When I Let You Down" are really for people who have gone through similar things, and gives them the simple message that they're not alone. We all go through these things. It's about what we do in response. Expect more of what Hunt is good at, with some country twang thrown in for good measure.

— JUSTIN MABEE



No Punk Influences Fight Within



THUMPER PUNK

No Punk Influences is a new street punk band on

Thumper Punk Records. I like a few bands on the label, but I am not feeling the punk here. I love street punk and punk in general, but the songs on *Fight Within* are sloppy, and not in the way a punk song should be sloppy.

There are gems on here, but overall, *Fight Within* is a record of hits and misses. Most of the songs have an old-school style all the way around, but soaked in early '90s overly done Christian-themed lyrics.

This record might sound better if I had a few drinks in me, I hate to say I'd rather listen to some of those original '90s Christian punk bands than the tracks on this record. Some punkers are going to love this record, but they should have made an EP of the six good songs on the record, and worked towards writing a more cohesive, deliberate and mature full-length release.

— ROB HOUSTON



Lion of Judah Lion of Judah



THUMPER PUNK

Let's get something straight early on — the Texas-based Lion of Judah knows what they're about from an ideological standpoint. They are a Christian hardcore band, and it's not just because of their name, as their lyrics are almost solely based on the Christian life.

But knowing your own beliefs doesn't automatically

translate into beautiful, memorable art. Although their lyrics are very sincere, they lack a poetic flare that many other metal and hardcore bands have, and it ends up coming across as cliché.

There are several interesting examples, however, which include allusions to Biblical parables (“Free me from this barren land I’m planted among, take me from this dying valley plant me in the fertile soil,” from “Catacombs”) and complex theological thoughts (“Not all who cry ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom; I never knew you,” from “Reclamation”).

More frustrating than any qualms with lyrics is the music. They define themselves as hardcore, and while that is certainly the case in some of their songs (especially “Catacombs” and “Messiah”), in the end, they often slip into a generic metalcore sound, with all the chugging, bass drops and heavy distortion.

Their first four songs (out of five) feature heavy vocals over plenty of distorted, basic riffs. While there isn’t anything unprofessional or cheap about it, there isn’t anything memorable.

The fifth song, “Messiah,” starts off promising with soft guitar picking and slow, hardcore vocals, but it’s laced with an unnatural echo (similar to Hundredth’s cover of Nine Inch Nail’s “Hurt”). It takes away the natural hardcore essence. There are other examples of overediting (or overthinking), with electronic, unnatural staccato riffs, an obnoxious fad in metalcore (something *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Issues* and *For Today* have helped popularize).

This isn’t a poor album, and the guys of Lion of Judah certainly put a lot of heart into their music and put out a

professional-sounding product. Metalcore and hardcore have been around for a while now, and originality is the key for metalcore’s future, and that is often where Lion of Judah falls short with their latest EP.



KB
100%

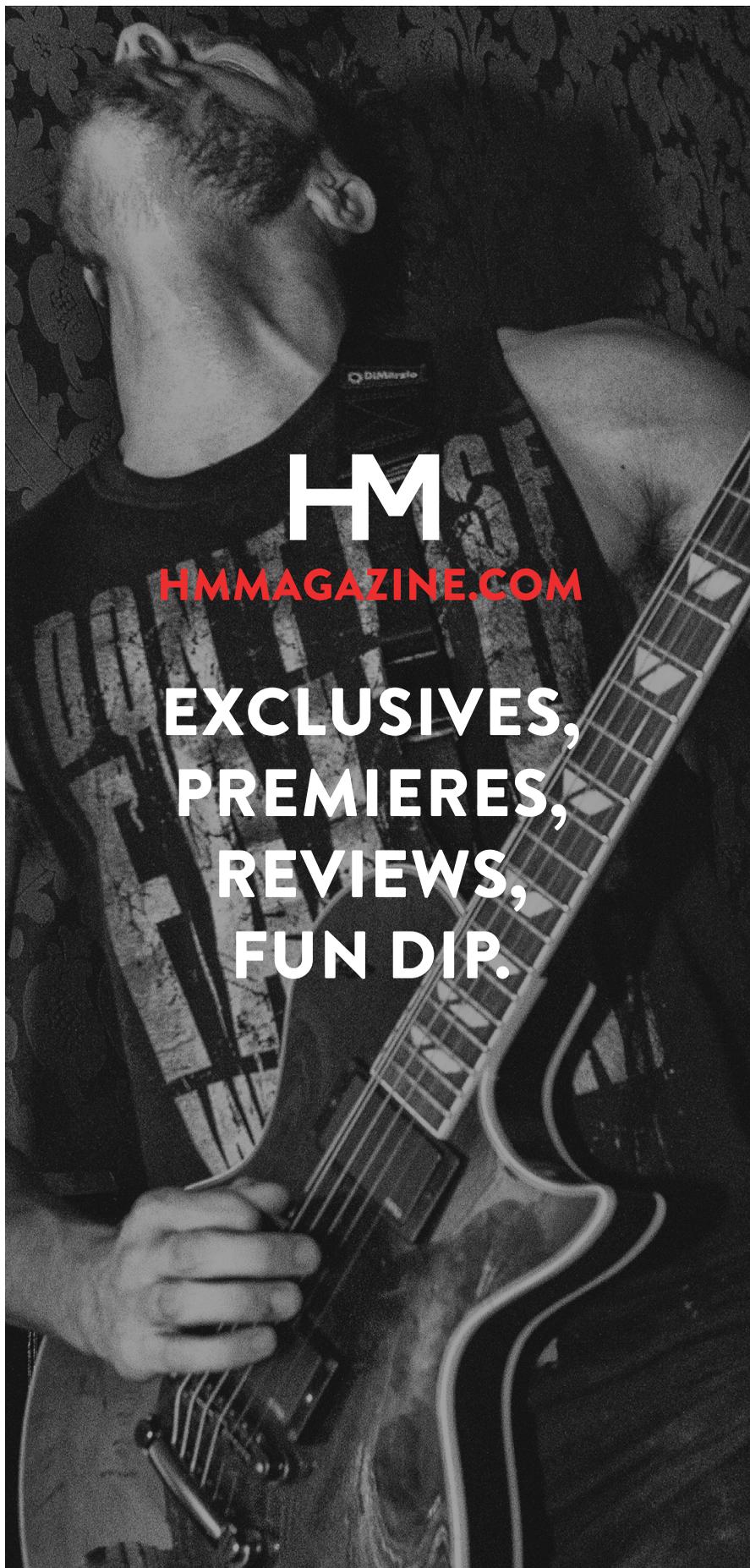


REACH

Florida hip-hop artist KB came on the scene in 2011 with his mixtape, *Who is KB?* Now, four years later, he’s back with his follow-up, the EP, *100%*. With six tracks of hard-hitting truth, KB has stepped into the Dirty South sound that has made Reach Records the powerhouse it is today.

The record has a mainstream sound with a flow you can grasp. I appreciate the style; I am more of an underground, backpack hip-hop head. It is a very catchy record, with tracks “Undeclared,” “Crazy,” and the title track, “KB 100.” It’s got good range, too; the more serious tracks “Give it My All” and “Doubts” hit home. The only unfortunate misstep on the EP is that each track has the same formula — start off slow, build. Over the course of the record, the structure became obnoxious; I need more variety in a hip-hop record. KB really comes strong on this record. It’s a great step in proving he can hang with the big dogs.

— ROB HOUSTON



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