

A positive development for former blink-182 members

by George Varga

At first blink, (plus44) seems to be jinxed. At second blink, well, ditto.

On Sept. 9, drummer Travis Barker broke his right arm while filming a video for "When Your Heart Stops Beating," the infectious title track from (plus44)'s debut album.

His injury, which was exacerbated by a subsequent European tour that took place before his broken limb was diagnosed, led to the postponement of the four-man band's debut U.S. tour. It was scheduled to begin Oct. 13 in San Diego but instead began Nov. 8 in Tampa, Fla. The tour finds the right-handed Barker gamely drumming with just his feet and his left arm (his right is in a brace).

ON THE PLUS SIDE - Travis Barker and Mark Hoppus, seen here, formerly of blink-182, say their new band (plus 44) is a "really positive" development. CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Kramer/Getty Images. To further compound matters, when (plus44) singer-bassist Mark Hoppus conducted a phone interview recently from Los Angeles International Airport, where he was awaiting a flight to a concert in Chicago, he was feeling under the weather and battling a sore throat.

"It's the worst thing to have on tour, being a singer," Hoppus, 34, said. "It never fails that, on a tour, someone

will get sick. As far as Travis' drumming goes, you can't tell the difference, except when there's supposed to be 16th note hi-hat (cymbal) parts and drum rolls, which he can't do."

But injuries and illness haven't dampened the spirit of this hard-rocking quartet, whose band name is pronounced "Plus Forty-Four" and was inspired by the international telephone dialing code for the United Kingdom. And while Hoppus and Barker readily acknowledge that - if it was up to them - (plus44) wouldn't even exist, they aren't complaining.

Both are eager to take advantage of the new musical opportunities afforded them by the implosion of their former band, pop-punk powerhouse blink-182. The San Diego-bred trio crashed and burned early in 2005 when singer-guitarist Tom DeLonge abruptly quit the group to launch a new band, Angels & Airwaves.

For Hoppus and Barker, the split was like an unexpected and unwanted divorce. It followed what had been, for Hoppus and DeLonge, a 13-year musical marriage. Barker replaced original blink drummer Scott Raynor in 1998.

"Um, yeah," said Hoppus, who doesn't shy away from discussing the issue but weighs his words carefully. "I mean, Tom definitely went through a bunch of changes and he quit the band in a really ugly manner. It was nothing we wanted or anticipated.

"But it's been really positive for us. It's been a breath of fresh air and a revitalization of how we play music and why."

Hoppus won't rule out an eventual blink reunion with DeLonge, no matter how unlikely a regrouping may seem now.

"It definitely doesn't feel like blink will get back together," he said. "But I'll never say never, because who knows what will happen?"

What some blink fans still want to know, though, is just what happened to break up the trio, which went from local-favorite status in the early 1990s to international stardom before the end of the same decade.

In a May interview, DeLonge cited a variety of reasons for his decision to leave blink. "We all kind of grew apart and we had different goals," he said. "People are different when they're 30 than when they are 16. ... A

lot happens (with) fame and money and responsibilities."

In the same interview, DeLonge contended there were no creative disputes, but that personal differences - including his desire to spend more time with his family - had been a major factor in blink's demise.

Asked to respond, Hoppus said, "I've always felt like we were given a lot of time to be with our families. We were so blessed with blink. We could afford to fly our families anywhere. Anywhere. Each of us had our own tour bus in blink and we could bring our families out on the road, and we did. I feel we get to spend more time with our families than anybody does who is working a 9-5 job. And, also, we're so blessed just to get to tour as much as we do. At the end, to say: 'Oh, I only want to do this two weeks at a time and then be home for two weeks' is ridiculous. ... I don't feel Tom was honest with what he was saying about why he quit the band. So when people ask me and Travis about that, I think they appreciate that we're answering it straight."

Hoppus channeled some of his anger and frustration over blink's split into "No It Isn't," a standout song from (plus44)'s album. It begins: Please understand / This isn't just goodbye / This is I can't stand you. The song also includes such scathing lines as: I listen to you talk, but talk is cheap / And my mouth is filled with blood / From trying not to speak / So search for an excuse / And someone to believe you.

"It was hugely cathartic to write about what happened," Hoppus said. "Everything I needed to say went into that one song. I never thought about not putting it out."

DeLonge's ambitious debut album with Angels & Airwaves, "We Don't Need to Whisper," is a vehicle for him to channel his love of U2, The Cure and other English bands whose "epic" sound he wanted to emulate.

Conversely, "When Your Heart Stops Beating" seems very much like a logical extension of blink's upbeat brand of pop-punk. The crucial difference is that blink's patented brattiness and proudly juvenile antics have been replaced by a sense of - dare we say it? - maturity. At the same time, Hoppus, Barker and (plus44) guitarists Shane Gallagher and Craig Fairbaugh have retained the youthful vitality that fueled blink's music.

"It was natural," Hoppus said. "We're not trying to divorce ourselves from anything we did in the past. There are songs on our album that sound like a continuation of what Travis and I were doing in blink, which is cool. And there are some that don't, which is also cool."

Given these similarities and Hoppus and Barker's blink heritage, it's logical that some fans will hope to hear at least a song or two from blink's back catalog when (plus44) performs. Not gonna happen.

"Travis and I have been pretty clear that it would be disingenuous to the people supporting us to play blink songs," said Hoppus. "I definitely feel like we would have every right to play (songs by blink). Because, technically, Travis and I are still blink and have every right to. But out of respect for the memory of that band and the people who supported us, we won't. When a band I love breaks up and they go on with new guys, with the same band name and the same songs, it just doesn't feel right."

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