

honeyhoney: Getting all the buzz

by *George_Varga*

Unlike Jack Bauer, the rogue U.S. government agent he portrays on the hit TV series "24," actor Kiefer Sutherland didn't resort to life-threatening torture to make honeyhoney's Suzanne Santo and Ben Jaffe sweat up a storm, because he held their fate in his hands.

Equal parts country and rock, folk and blues, vintage swing and torch ballads, honeyhoney's Ben Jaffe and Suzanne Santo "are a dynamic duo of Southern fried chicken and waffles." Photo courtesy of Dan Martensen. "I remember being so freaking nervous that I nearly vomited," said singer, violinist and banjo player Santo, 24, as she recalled her and singer-guitarist Jaffe's first encounter with Sutherland. While not a homicidal maniac in real life, the veteran actor also can seem intimidating as the head of Ironworks, the Los Angeles-based indie record label he co-founded in 2005 with veteran singer-songwriter and producer Jude Cole.

This high-stakes encounter took place in 2007 in West Hollywood, Calif. Performing in front of a packed audience at the Keyclub, the genre-leaping honeyhoney, who use all lowercase letters in their name, were a finalist in a music talent competition sponsored by a local radio station. The judging panel included Sutherland and the head of VH1.

The winning act would get a "larger-than-life" check and a demo deal with Ironworks, which in turn could lead to a full-fledged album contract.

Santo and Jaffe, also 24, emerged victorious after performing "Bouncing Ball" and "Give Yourself to Me," both highlights of honeyhoney's arresting 2008 debut album, "First Rodeo." The oversized check for \$25,000 they were awarded was so big it barely fit in the back seat of Jaffe's car.

"We were driving home in Ben's rickety old Saab. At the time, I didn't even have a car," Santo said. "We had two friends with us in the back seat, with this massive check that covered their faces. It was quite memorable."

Since then, Ohio native Santo and former New Yorker Jaffe have specialized in creating memorable moments. Apart from directing the video for "Little Toy Gun," a standout honeyhoney song that alternates soft, bluesy verses with a twangy, Latin-inflected chorus, Sutherland wisely has left the two to their own devices.

Witness this dynamic duo's vibrant performance in Solana Beach, Calif., last month at the Belly Up Tavern, where honeyhoney received an increasingly enthusiastic response during their opening set for English singer-songwriter James Morrison.

"The way I want people to hear about us is from us playing live in their town. That's our best route to success," Jaffe said.

"Touring and pounding the pavement is an honorable way to earn interest, and I feel like I've pounded the pavement a lot in other areas of my life," added Santo, who became a New York model at 16 and then moved into TV and movie acting ("Law & Order," "Chasing Amy" and the feature film "Imaginary Heroes," which co-starred Sigourney Weaver and Emile Hirsch).

Equal parts country and rock, folk and blues, vintage swing and torch ballads, Santo and Jaffe are accomplished songwriters and performers. Their stylistic diversity suggests they could perform at Coachella and a country-music festival and earn similarly favorable reactions.

With a welcome lack of affectation, the two paint vivid yet concise musical portraits. What results is both fresh and familiar, earthy and eloquent, whether you are hearing it for the first time or the 10th.

"The songs dictate what instrumentation or orchestration we use," said Jaffe, who started studying jazz drumming at age 11 after hearing such giants as Art Blakey and Max Roach.

"At the same time, the songs are inspired by people in specific genres and our wanting to write songs like Paul Simon, George Gershwin or Hank Williams, so it's a combination. Without getting too theoretical or geeky, my harmonic basis comes from jazz standards. 'Black Crows,' the opening song on our album, is a mix of (Belgian swing jazz guitar icon) Django Reinhardt and Bob Marley because I got really into Gypsy music for a while.

"Most rock music only uses triads, three-note chords. Coming from a jazz background, all these chords that are viewed as 'out there' were normal to me. The kind of thing I'm trying to do now is to think more 'pop-centrally' because I'm so used to using wide harmonies and extended chords."

In concert, Santo and Jaffe are versatile and confident enough to mix such varied classics as Smokey Robinson's 1960 gem "Who's Loving You?" and Smashing Pumpkins' "1979" in with their own songs, without any discernible rise or dip in quality.

"Honeyhoney are a dynamic duo of Southern fried chicken and waffles, with a hot babe who can sing better than you can and a guitar player who never thought he'd write songs this good," said Ironworks co-founder Cole, who co-produced "First Rodeo" with Santo and Jaffe. "I love them."

Jaffe moved to Los Angeles "for the weather," after being accepted at the school of music at New York University.

Santo, who grew up singing in her family's Italian restaurant in Ohio, is a classically trained violinist. Her musical catharsis came after she followed her then-boyfriend to Los Angeles, only to have her heart broken a week later.

Together, Santo and Jaffe should have a promising future, especially if Ironworks "€" which only has two other bands on its roster "€" continues to patiently nurture the duo's artistic growth.

"There's a lot of trust involved in our songwriting, in that neither one of us will belittle the other if there's a disagreement," Santo said. "If anything, we're fans of each other, and it's exciting."

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