Pop Talk: Kings of Leon have grown into rock royalty

by George_Varga

It's been 2 1/2 years since Kings of Leon opened the first concert of U2's 2005 "Vertigo" world tour at the San Diego Sports Arena, but the members of this critically acclaimed Tennessee band remember that night as clearly as yesterday.

KINGS OF LEON - The Kings of Leon are Nathan Followill, Matthew Followill, Caleb Followill and Jared Followill. CNS Photo courtesy of James Minchin III. It was the first time this young quartet of rootsy Southern rockers had ever performed in an arena, let alone on the opening night of a tour by one of the biggest rock acts in the world.

"Oh, my God, we were scared to death!" said drummer Nathan Followill, who is Kings of Leon's oldest member at 28. "We had never played in a place that big and we were flying by the seat of our pants. That was the first time I played in a place so big that the snare drum (echo) slapped me in the face a second after I hit it.

"We didn't know what to expect and I'm sure our whole sound crew was in the same position. I think we were more excited about seeing U2's show than playing our own. I'm sure we used a whopping 31 minutes of our 40-minute set time, just because we played the songs four times faster than usual. We were really in awe. It didn't sink in how big a deal it was until the fourth show, when we were getting 50 calls a day from everyone from our 10-year-old cousins to our 65-year-old great aunts."

Now on the road to promote its excellent third album, "Because of the Times," Kings of Leon has since toured as the opening act for Bob Dylan and Pearl Jam, as well as headlining many shows of its own in increasingly large venues. In the process, the band has grown much more adept at performing in large settings.

Regardless of the size of a venue, Followill and his bandmates are now able to deliver their increasingly ambitious music on stage with fire, finesse and a growing command of dynamics. That comes in handy when they perform the often-haunting music from "Because of the Times" (think Gothic swamp-rock that provides the missing link between U2 and Creedence Clearwater Revival, by way of The Pixies and Bruce Springsteen

at his most desolate-sounding).

"We've learned you can make albums that sound just as good in a 15,000-capacity arena as on a record," the bearded drummer and singer said. "Those tours we did with high-profile artists taught us to be a little more classy and considerate of the bands you play with. Because you never know when you might have the next Dylan, U2 or Pearl Jam opening for you.

"Touring with them also taught us that we all started at the same place; it's just that some people get there a little quicker. We appreciate every opportunity we've got. And, hopefully, we'll get to keep doing what we're doing."

Given how much Kings of Leon has grown and improved from album to album, chances are good it will have staying power. The band's lineup, which also includes Followill's singing brothers, Caleb and Jared, on guitar and bass, and their cousin, Matthew Followill, on guitar, has remained intact since their 2003 recording debut, the EP "Holy Roller Novocain," was released.

The "holy roller" reference was more than casual. The three Followill brothers are the sons of a roving Pentecostal minister. They grew up playing gospel music in various churches across the South at which their father preached. And the new album was named after an annual Louisiana gathering of Pentecostal preachers that Nathan and his siblings attended almost every year until the rock 'n' roll bug bit them in their mid-teens.

"It's a festival, but instead of bands, it's with preachers," he said. "That was really one of the funnest times of our lives as kids. Because it was the one week we got to hang out with all the other preachers' kids and meet up with your little make-out partner from the year before. It was for preachers and their families only, and you felt a little special because everyone was pretty much on the same level. It's still held each year - we're waiting for the lawsuit to be filed for copyright infringement for using its name for our album."

That album happens to be the best and most daring yet by this constantly maturing band. Just how daring is demonstrated by the opening song, "Knocked Up," a slow building mini-epic about teen pregnancy and

youthful fear and rebellion. It clocks in at seven minutes and covers a wide range of moods and tempos.

"Most people who buy albums listen to the first 30 seconds of a song, and - if it doesn't grab their attention - it's on to the next one. You can listen to the whole record in six minutes," Followill noted.

"We wanted to show people that this might not be the typical Kings of Leon album they're expecting. It's something some of our fans may not like, but we were willing to take that risk to maybe get fans we wouldn't have gotten. As a band, you should want every show and record to be better than the last."

Two key signs of Kings of Leon's heady artistic growth are the band's impressive use of electronic textures and the varied time signatures and rhythmic accents Followill deftly executes on such standout songs as "McFearless" and "My Party." Even on "The Runner," which is set to a basic 3/4 waltz time, he breaks up the pulse with skittering left-hand snare drum accents that provide a subtle counterpoint to the song's bleak lyrics of longing and existential angst.

"On our first album, I just played straight 4/4 because I was scared to death and had never made a record," Followill said. "On the second record, I stepped out and expanded a little. But on this one, we'd played the songs a lot at sound-check before we recorded them, so it was probably a natural progression and also me wanting to show that I can play a little more than just a 2 1/2-minute barn-burner. I think we all tried to do that on this record."

Music is now, if not a religion, a way of life for the Followill brothers. Given their father's life as a traveling preacher, did any of them consider following in their dad's footsteps?

"I'm pretty sure Caleb would have ended up being a preacher," Followill said. "I would have been more of the cool drummer whose hair was just a little too long and who would take the youth group to Hooters."

HE'S GOT THE BEAT

Kings of Leon drummer Nathan Followill is only 28, but his favorite drummers all rose to fame in the 1960s and 1970s. Here's a look at three of his favorites:

LEVON HELM

Still active at 67, this no-nonsense drummer is best known for the 12 years he spent anchoring The Band between 1964 and 1976. As talented at singing in a wonderfully earthy voice and playing mandolin as he was at drumming, the Arkansas-born Helm was The Band's only American member. He also contributed stunning lead vocals to some of the group's finest material, including "Up on Cripple Creek" and "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down."

On The Band's 1976 swan song, the live double-album and concert film "The Last Waltz," Helm soared repeatedly with his group and while accompanying such stellar guests as Eric Clapton, Dr. John and Van Morrison. A sometime film actor - his credits include "Coal Miner's Daughter" and "The Right Stuff" - Helm has resumed singing and drumming after battling back from throat cancer. His first solo album in 25 years, "An Age of Miracles," comes out Oct. 30.

Suggested albums: "Music From Big Pink," "Rock of Ages," "The Last Waltz."

Followill: "I like Levon because he's a Southern boy who sings so soulfully while he drums."

STEWART COPELAND

At 55, he is the youngest member of The Police, whose ongoing reunion has resulted in the highest-grossing rock concert tour of 2007. A Virginia native whose father helped launch the CIA, Copeland formed The Police in 1977 in London after spending several years playing with the prog-rock band Curved Air.

As a member of The Police, Copeland became one of the most influential drummers in pop music, thanks to his fiery rock licks, clipped reggae rhythms and sophisticated polyrhythms. Prior to regrouping with The Police, he scored films, led the short-lived band Animal Logic, wrote an opera and performed as a member of Oysterhead with former Phish guitarist Trey Anastasio and Primus bassist Les Claypool.

Suggested albums: (with The Police) "Reggatta de Blanc" and "Synchronicity"; (solo) "The Rhythmatist."

Followill: "Stewart sounds like three drummers playing at once, but he's always in the pocket."

JOHN BONHAM

As the mighty rhythmic heartbeat of Led Zeppelin, he anchored and propelled one of the most galvanizing rock bands ever. Although he died in 1980 at the age of 32, Bonham's impact continues to be felt through the many rock and heavy metal drummers who copy him and the countless hip-hop acts who sample his beats on their records.

A thunderous player, he could also perform with delicacy when needed. Bonham's marathon solos could last 30 minutes and would usually find him drumming both with and without sticks. Led Zeppelin's other three members wisely decided to disband after his death, in large part because they realized no other drummer could

fill his shoes. That's still the case today.

Suggested albums: "Led Zeppelin," "Led Zeppelin II," "Physical Graffiti."

Followill: "John Bonham hit the drums so loud, but never lost control. He was always in control."

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