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They're in the Band: Join the Floatilla

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floatingmen.com

Scot Evans (left) and Jeff Holmes have long been stalwarts of the Nashville music scene.

MARK MONTGOMERY/RECHOMUSIC

Join the Floatilla

FANS' DEVOTION INSPIRES FLOATING MEN TO KEEP THE MUSIC PLAYING

The word “fan” is short for “fanatic” — a term that aptly describes the fans of The Floating Men.

Now in their 16th year as a duo, Furman alumni Jeff Holmes and Scot Evans, both 1983 graduates, have cultivated one of indie rock's most devoted followings. And although The Floating Men stopped touring in 1996, their fans, the self-dubbed “Floatilla,” flock from all over the South and Midwest to the band's occasional live concerts — and usually wind up singing every word right along with them.

“It's kind of creepy,” Holmes jokes.

A long way from their days of “borrowing” rehearsal space in the basement of Furman's music building, the Nashville-based duo has released seven studio albums and six “authorized bootlegs.” And they can credit their last three studio albums not just to their fans' devotion, but to their wallets as well. Their 2004

release, “The Haunting,” was the most recent project fully funded by the fans, who actually became executive producers by paying up to \$1,000 to watch the group record their tracks.

“The Haunting” is a concept album in which all 13 tracks are sung from the perspectives of ghosts, as they watch one of their fellow deceased unintentionally haunt the lover he left behind. While such offbeat tales may seem outside the realm of common experience, it is precisely those troubled characters and vivid images that make the band's music personal to so many fans.

“The songs [have] such a sense of longing for something that really hits home — even if you weren't sure where that was,” says Cris Stanfill, executive producer of “Crave,” the album's eighth track. “The stories are about feeling your own soul and mortality, and finding peace amidst the rubble of the life that we used to live.”

Stanfill, who has followed the band for 13 years, says that Holmes has grown up right alongside her, from their days of wild parties and youthful naiveté to more reflective and (theoretically) responsible adulthood.

At Furman, Holmes majored in philosophy and Evans in music theory. Even then, Holmes was the vocalist — he was a member of the Furman Singers — and Evans was the instrumentalist, playing in the band and orchestra. Both were in the Jazz Ensemble, directed at the time by Richard Steffen.

Steffen helped find them gigs around Greenville, from playing college parties and wedding receptions to backing up Elvis impersonators. “Anything that paid,” says Evans.

After graduation, they played in the band The Little Saints (which included Grog Eisnaugle '82), performing in college towns and nightclubs across the

Southeast. But the “loud and fast” musical style popular in the mid-eighties wasn’t satisfying to Holmes and Evans, who count among their inspirations such varied performers as Simon and Garfunkel, Bruce Springsteen, the Eagles and Nine Inch Nails. They wanted to be a great acoustic group — even in the days before MTV Unplugged.

When The Little Saints ended, The Floating Men took shape — and Holmes and Evans found the unique sound they craved. Die-hard fan Patsy DuBos

describes it as “a country and Southern-influenced thinking-person’s Americana [with] an overlay of rock and roll and jazz.”

Such a complex style seems to come naturally to The Floating Men. In fact, that’s how they got their name. “Someone told us we made it look so easy, we looked like we’d float off the stage,” Holmes explains.

Nonetheless, the men swear it is anything but easy to make it to where they are. “We basically jumped in without a net, into a very demanding career,” Holmes says.

Lacking the promotional help of a big-name music label or radio station, they worked their way out of obscurity with sheer “sweat and word of mouth.” They performed an exhausting 250 nights of the year in the early nineties, having so much fun that at first they didn’t realize how miserable they were.

“You have to be willing to sacrifice every semblance of a normal life,” Holmes says.

Finally, they grew weary of touring. Since 1996 they’ve settled into relatively

myspace.com/needtobreathe

On the verge

NEEDTOBREATHE AWAITS APRIL RELEASE OF MAJOR-LABEL CD

The wail of electric guitars echoes down Main Street in the sleepy South Carolina burg of Walhalla. It is a sound uncharacteristic of the standard Sunday serenade. In this city religion rules, and the Ten Commandments hang framed next to the garbage cans at Arby’s.

But tonight a band from neighboring Seneca, local favorite NEEDTOBREATHE, is back in town after a six-week recording session in England, and the modest, 453-seat Walhalla Civic Auditorium is hosting the homecoming.

In the world of rock and roll, a venue like Walhalla might be considered a humbling step backwards for a band that has played with such musical heavyweights as Jason Mraz, Switchfoot, Everclear and Collective Soul. But for a couple of guys that got their start playing talent shows and fraternity parties at Furman, no venue is too small.

What began back in 1999 as un-tailored guitar strumming on the second floor balcony of Manly Hall now has pioneering members and freshman roommates Bear Rinehart ’03 and Joe Stillwell ’03 on the brink of rock

stardom. From Furman to Los Angeles to England and back, the two have carried their sound around the world.

Last March NEEDTOBREATHE, which at the time included Bear’s brother Bryant (Bo), bassist Seth Bolt and keyboardist Nick Stills (who recently left the band), signed a record deal with Atlantic/Lava Records. The trip to England followed soon thereafter, and today the group is anxiously awaiting the April 4 release of its first major-label album from multi-platinum producer Andy Green.

The group has a strong following among alumni and students, but Bear says that their popularity didn’t really start growing until after they graduated. Even though as students they once played 120 shows in a year, Bear and Joe say NEEDTOBREATHE passed under the radar during their Furman days.

“I think we were almost unnoticed,” says Bear. “There were other bands. People had other stuff going on.”

In school Joe was a member of Furman Singers; Bear was a star receiver for the football team and, according to Joe, a pseudo-celebrity on campus.

Tack on classes, papers, presentations and exams, and you’ve got two pretty typical Furman students. Add a struggling start-up band and you’ve got the makings of impending burnout.

Still, the two found time to make weekly trips back to their hometown of Seneca, where they and their bandmates turned the Rineharts’ dad’s church, United Assembly, into a rehearsal studio.

Bear earned his degree in political science but readily admits that academics weren’t foremost on his mind. He was always determined to make the band a career, and he made music a priority even Furman football coach Bobby Lamb respected.

“There were a couple of times I’d leave a game to go play a show,” he says. “The other guys ragged on me because I looked different with the long hair and all that, but the coaches were really cool about it.”

As graduation loomed, so did the pressure (both internal and external) to find a “real job.” At Furman, where graduate school acceptance rates and postgraduate job placements are points

normal lives in Nashville, complete with families and day jobs. While maintaining an active recording schedule, they have limited their live performances to occasional weekends in Nashville, Atlanta and other nearby venues.

One of their most recent excursions was to Chattanooga, Tenn., for their fifth annual Labor Day "Floating Men Fest," honoring the band's 15 years of music.

According to Evans, the fans deserve the credit for their success and longevity. "If we didn't have their depth of devotion,

we probably wouldn't have lasted this long," he says.

Now The Floating Men are moving on to another phase in their post-touring lives. Evans, who recently earned a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, has begun teaching in the community psychology program at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. Holmes remains in Nashville, where he is a conservation planner and senior field biologist for Conservation Southeast, Inc.

Despite Evans' move, they expect

to continue to record and perform together as circumstances allow. Evans says, "I'll be back and forth to Nashville quite a bit, working on some research with colleagues at Vanderbilt, so we should be able to keep up our activities."

Which, no doubt, is music to the ears of the Floatilla.

— Jessica Miller



Critic Dave Weinthal has described NEEDTOBREATHE (from left, Bear Rinehart, Joe Stillwell, Bo Rinehart, Nick Stills, Seth Bolt) as having a "one-of-a-kind college-meets-mainstream rock sound and rock-star charisma to match."

CHARLIE REGISTER

of pride, "rock star" isn't exactly a typical occupational aspiration.

"Part of going to Furman is expecting when you get out to make a certain amount of money," says Bear. "The further along I got, the less of a reality that became."

Joe, a business administration major, waited tables for two years after graduation, a job that at least allowed him

to practice and perform. Bear married his college sweetheart, Mary Reames Sawyer '03, and remained devoted to his mistress, music. For a while they were "starving artists," according to Joe's brother Adam Stillwell '99, who today helps manage the band's tour schedule.

"They're at a point now where they can look back and say that it was worth

it," says Adam. "They're at a point where they could make it huge."

A point that stretches back to their Furman connections, and to a string of fortunate events that aligned like stepping-stones down the path to success.

In 2002, while NEEDTOBREATHE was still awaiting its big break, Jeff Krones '04, then a Furman junior, overheard