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They're in the Band: On the verge

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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."

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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

the band's music being played by his roommates, who played football with Bear. Impressed with the band's sound, Kronos passed the music on to his dad, who is the former head of Columbia Records in London and the current owner of Kip Kronos Management in Nashville. "It was the first time I'd ever sent him music, but I thought it was really good and had potential," says Jeff.

His dad agreed. He began managing

NEEDTOBREATHE exclusively and is responsible for landing the band's record deal with Atlantic/Lava. Jeff now works for Creative Artists Agency and has been booking NEEDTOBREATHE since they returned from England.

"There were a lot of music people at Furman," Bear notes. "Not just music majors but people connected to the business in some way. We got lucky without knowing it."

Now, with the CD's impending release and a national promotional tour to follow, Joe and Bear feel lucky, yes, to have come such a long way from playing music on a dorm balcony. They feel blessed to be doing what they love. And they feel relieved to be turning rock and roll into a reputable (and profitable) career even Furman can respect.

— Katie Levans

florezmusic.com

Rockin' the boat

BUZZ IS BUILDING FOR THE MEN OF FLOREZ

Apparently South Housing is a breeding

ground for budding musicians, because in 1999, within earshot of the Manly Hall balcony where Bear Rinehart and Joe Stillwell of NEEDTOBREATHE got their start, roommates Alex Florez and Dusty Emerick settled into their room in McGlothlin Hall and onto a path that would also turn their common hobby into a career.

Alex had fallen in love with the guitar at the age of 6. He had big dreams inside his little body, and his mother had to fight to convince his teacher that his small hands could handle such a large instrument.

Alex proved mom right. He caught on quickly and by eighth grade was writing his own music and lyrics.

Dusty grew up in Memphis, Tenn., surrounded by the blues, rock and bluegrass. Stirred by what he describes as the raw simplicity of the city's music, he taught himself to play the guitar and went on to master the mandolin, harmonica and banjo.

When it came time to fill out college paperwork, both guys indicated the guitar as an interest on their roommate placement forms. And both were pleased with the outcome.

"I feel like freshman halls at Furman are arranged somewhat strategically," says Alex, "which worked out well for us."

The two began practicing in their room and eventually moved on to audition for casual shows on campus. Shortly before a café-style gig in the PalaDen, they recruited Dusty's Sigma Chi brother, Erik Huffman '03, to play bass.

Erik, a Greenville native, learned to play bass in high school, when he was part of a short-lived band. Alex and Dusty welcomed him into what was then known as "The Alex Florez Band." Guitarist Dana Brewster '02, who had played briefly with NEEDTOBREATHE, joined the group in the winter of 2000.

In the beginning, the guys say that the band, which would soon become FLOREZ, wasn't a full-time job. "We didn't play enough for that," says Alex. "When we played it was serious but a seasonal event."

Once they began looking for bigger gigs, they visited the Handlebar, a legendary performing house/listening room in Greenville. Alex was offended when, after being informed that only "big bands" play at the Handlebar, they were turned away.

"I understand we were nothing except

what existed inside my head at the time," says Alex, "but I still took it as a personal insult."

The group continued to practice and play small venues until the summer of 2002, when they were presented the opportunity to travel to New York and record their debut album, "Find Yourself," with Dana's longtime friend and guitar teacher Lee Kizer. They rented a space in Queens, where they recorded for three days, 16 hours a day, and got their first taste of being a "real band." Alex, Dusty and Erik then returned to Furman for their senior year, while Dana, who had earned his philosophy degree, remained in New York to help produce the album.

"We had a friend with the means to make a decent record, so we went with it with little knowledge and less money," says Alex. "What we accomplished wasn't perfect, but it marked the beginning of our career and the foundation of our first year."

At that point, they committed to making FLOREZ a career.

For Alex, a religion major, and Dusty, who majored in art, the decision was never in doubt. "This has always been my career," says Alex, while Dusty adds,