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They're in the Band: Rockin' the boat

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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,



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"I knew I was not going to be filling out any applications of any sort. If I chose any other job, I would be itching to do this."

But until the trip to New York, Erik, a business major, was still on the fence. "I thought I was supposed to go on to grad school or get a real job or something," he says. "I just always thought of music as a hobby. It wasn't until then that I was confident enough to go with it."

Today the band members live together in Nashville with Brian "Smitty" Smith '03, who managed their most recent tour, and drummer Josh Robinson. In Nashville they recorded their sophomore album, "Take Flight," with Ed Cash, who was named producer of the year at the 2005 BMI Gospel Music Awards.

The CD was released in April 2005, and since then FLOREZ has been touring (mostly in the Southeast, although last summer they played at the House of Blues in Chicago). They've returned to Furman

twice to play at Homecoming. And yes, they've even headlined at the Handlebar.

But do they feel like rock stars yet? "No more than I did when I was 12," says Alex. "When I was 12 I thought I was the coolest guy in the world."

Their fans think they're pretty cool right now. Thanks to their growing following, FLOREZ won a spot on the coveted Rock Boat tour, a five-day cruise ("The World's Greatest Floating Music Festival") through the Caribbean featuring such artists as Sister Hazel, Better Than Ezra, Pat Green, Shawn Mullins, Virginia Coalition and the Pat McGee Band. The ship sailed January 14; FLOREZ earned its way into the lineup through an on-line popular vote.

The band's sound covers everything from blues to hip-hop, rock and Latin. And the Rock Boat is sure to give FLOREZ invaluable exposure and could be its ticket to the big time — although in the world of music, nothing is guaranteed.

But for a group of guys who got their start through a chance roommate lottery, anything could happen. "Sometimes the best music comes when you least expect it," says Dusty.

— Katie Levans

Photo: Just before Dusty Emerick, Alex Florez, Dana Brewster and Erik Huffman (left to right) went on the Rock Boat tour in January, their song "Natalie" was featured on the hit NBC series "Scrubs."