



LOCAL NATIVES

WORDS BY SHANNON CARLIN
PHOTOS BY DOVE SHORE

FOREVER RESTLESS



“THERE WAS NEVER A TURNING POINT LIKE, ‘WE HAVE TO DO THIS!’ IT WAS A NATURAL PROGRESSION...WE JUST FUMBLER AROUND UNTIL IT MADE SENSE TO US.”

L-R: Taylor Rice, Andy Hamm, Matt Frazier, Ryan Hahn, Kelcey Ayer

There’s nothing better than a nice, refreshing ice cream cone on a warm, sunny day. Your body seems to take pleasure in each and every lick. The same can be said for when you hear the perfect song. Your body stops itself in its tracks and takes it all in, savoring each and every note. With their heavily orchestrated melodies, free flowing three-part harmonies and pulsating tribal beats, Local Natives are the perfect ice cream.

“There are many companies that make [ice cream] and there are hundreds of flavors, but when you nail the best vanilla or chocolate your body rejoices,” explains Les Savy Fav bassist and ice cream connoisseur, Syd Butler. “I know this sounds over the top, but when I heard the BBC studio version of ‘Airplanes,’ I was frozen.” It does sound a bit far-fetched, but once you’ve actually heard these guys, you can excuse a few food-related analogies.

When Butler (who signed the band to his label Frenchkiss) saw the guys for the first time, he was amazed by how well they could play all their instruments. “I actually couldn’t hear the songs very well, but I was so impressed with all they were doing. Kelcey [Ayer] was playing keyboards, drumming and singing at the same time! I can barely play the bass.” With the guys switching instruments frequently and almost always having a percussive instrument in their hand, camaraderie is certainly a key ingredient in the Local Natives’ distinct sound.

But the L.A. five-piece, which includes keyboardist Ayer, drummer Matt Frazier, bassist Andy Hamm and guitarists Ryan Hahn and Taylor Rice, isn’t easy to define. “There are four or five aspects and words that people use a lot...percussion-driven, harmony-laced, indie rock,” Frazier says. Those descriptions may be helpful, but the comparisons to Fleet Foxes and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young just seem like required reference points. In actuality, these guys take the familiar and flip it on its head, making something you’re convinced you’ve never heard before.

Ayer, Hahn and Rice (who all attended neighboring high schools in Orange County, CA) have been playing together for nearly eight years. Frazier and Hamm, who both shared the other three’s love for harmonies, joined the lineup shortly after. In the beginning, the guys were calling themselves Cavil at Rest and were still trying to harness in on what kind of band they wanted to be. It would be another two years before they would start calling themselves Local Natives. “There was never a turning point like, ‘We have to do this!’ It was a natural progression,” Frazier explains. “We just fumbled around until it made sense to us.” Ayer agrees that the name swap was less about a change in sound, and more about recognizing their maturity. “We stopped worrying so much about cool sounding guitar parts and focused more on the songs themselves.”

EXPLODING HEADS



The exploding head imagery is something bassist Andy Hamm came up with to address a time during the recording of *Gorilla Manor* when the band felt like their heads were about to burst with ideas. “The music can just be a lot of beautiful harmonies, and the artwork can almost be portrayed to some people as, you know... borderline gross,” says drummer Matt Frazier, who also does a lot of the artwork for the band. “The artwork itself is almost kind of a weird juxtaposition of the music. It’s something that wouldn’t be expected from a band like us.”



F

ocusing on the songs is a tedious and time-consuming five-person job. The fact that, as Ayer admits, the guys are “super nit-picky and hard to please” doesn’t help things move any quicker. But as Frazier says, “‘Quickly’ has never been in our vocabulary. We just want to build everything very slowly, naturally so it lasts.” Since all five of them are in the mix, you would imagine there would be some disputes, but these guys are so in sync they organically came together to make a cohesive album. “The thing I’m most proud of is how the record as a whole stands as a good representation of who we were, since the songs have been written over such an expansive period of our growth as a group,” Ayer says. Many songs, like their first single “Sun Hands,” were written nearly three years ago and haven’t changed much over the years. “Cards and Quarters,” which is one of the oldest songs, is the exception. “We recorded that song a year and a half ago, and it had a banjo for the rhythm line and this disco beat,” Ayer says. But after creating a sexier, mellow version for a Daytrotter session, the guys decided to re-record this new version for the album. Other songs, like closing track “Sticky Thread,” were written as recently as late 2009.

The majority of the songs, though, were written in the house the five guys shared in Orange County, affectionately nicknamed Gorilla Manor. Though they’ve since moved to Silver Lake, they named their debut in the house’s honor. “The album is by no means about the house,” Frazier says. “But I definitely think it helped kind of create the music and the sound we’ve come up with.” Though not known as a place that breeds good bands, L.A. even snuck its influence into the songs. “Living in Southern California definitely puts a ton of your time in the car, so there was a period of time when all I could think of were car analogies,” Ayer says. The best example of this is the

energetic “World News,” which talks about flipping the dial on the radio only to land on a sobering NPR news report.

Listening to *Gorilla Manor*, it’s easy to get caught up in the hyperactive percussion or the swoon-worthy vocals, but it’s the band’s ability to write clever and relatable songs about things like long distance relationships (“Cubism”), risk taking (“Camera Talk”), and people’s obsessions (“Wide Eyes”) that keep listeners hanging on. Even though there have been some misinterpretations (most commonly with “Airplanes,” which is not so much a love song, but a bittersweet ode to a grandpa Ayer never knew), the band is happy to let people know the reality of the lyrics. “These songs are put out there for people to feel something,” Ayer says. “If they can get any meaning out of it whatsoever, I consider that a huge success.”

Their biggest success, oddly enough, has to be the fact that they’ve convinced audiences to boo them. “Kelcey originally brought the ‘Airplanes’ piano riff to us, and I think in this case someone didn’t like the opening chords and like a booing ensued, [but] the next chord they were like, ‘Oh, oh I like this,’” Frazier says. “Even if we were practicing and trying to be professional, we’d boo...for some reason it just stuck.” What started as an inside joke not only made its way onto the album, but is quickly becoming a way for fans to involve themselves in the live shows.

Taking a backwards approach by touring in Europe before the U.S. (*Gorilla Manor* was even released three months earlier overseas), Local Natives are set on forming a connection with their audience, no matter what language they speak. “You don’t need to understand the words to get the tone and beauty of the song,” Ayer explains. “I know plenty of people that weep to Sigur Rós who don’t speak Icelandic, and I’m sure they react the same way in Iceland.” 🐼

INDIE ADVICE

Just a few years ago, we were all proclaiming death to the record label as we knew it, but it seems there’s still a little life left in them yet. Syd Butler (aka the man behind Frenchkiss) was nice enough to give a few tips for all those unsigned bands in need of guidance. Since he recently signed heavily-blogged-about acts like Local Natives, Freelance Whales and Suckers, we think he might know a thing or two.

- Don’t waste what little time and money you have sending out glossy photos and ten-page press booklets. Just send your two best songs, a link of yourself playing live, and a photo.

- Yes, MySpace is so yesterday, but if you’re an up-and-coming band, it’s your lifeline. So make sure you send a link to it. And not that link to the one you started way back in 2005, the one where Tom is now your only friend. Make sure it’s the most updated one.

- No indie label that’s running out of a one-bedroom in Brooklyn wants to store your fancily decorated jewel cases, so make sure you write your name on the CD-R inside.

- If you’re a four-piece experimental polka band, you might not be the right fit for Sub Pop. Make sure you know the label and what kind of bands they put out.

- Forget about getting a manager, or even worse a “friend-ager” to handle your business affairs. Instead, get yourself a good lawyer. You’ll be happy you did when you need to be bailed out of a Mexican jail.