

Masters' plan

Frederick band sets out to conquer universe with debut album

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by Nathan Oravec

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The Barenaked Ladies, They Might Be Giants and Jon Spencer's Blues Explosion walk into a bar.

The punch line: Frederick's own Masters of the Universe.

So it's not really a joke – but drummer Kelly Mills might find it amusing.

“I chuckle every time I hear a [new] comparison I've never heard before,” he said.

“It's not that it's a unique genre,” he said of the band's trademark sound. “But it's hard to compare it to anything you would hear on the radio.”

Take the trippy track “Babysnatching” and its solemn, spooky spoken prelude, or the rock tempest of “Tree Veins,” or the funky fusion free-for-all of “Alien Escape” from the band's debut album, “Don't Block the Box,” recently released on Baltimore label, Beechfields.

Attribute it all to the diverse influences of the band's key trio.

“I'm big into rock,” said Mills. “Music with a jammy, fusion feel.”

Bandleader Bing Kung, on the other hand, hails from a jazz and R&B background, while front man Aidan Ryan is a folk enthusiast.

“Aidan can probably sing any Bob Dylan song from memory,” said Mills.

Put them all together, allow to simmer, and then shell out \$4 for the CD, because you still won't quite get it without hearing it for yourself.

“Some people criticize us for not sticking to one genre,” said Kung. “We definitely have a diverse music portfolio.”

Kung co-founded the band with Ryan two years ago. Frederick born and bred, they met at Middletown High School, shared similar interests in music (Hendrix and Clapton and various other “guitar heroes,” said Ryan), and played in a mutual friend's band, Enema Milkshake, before each shipped off to college where they continued to hone their musical talents.

They corresponded throughout and following graduation the band ultimately got back together, joined this time by Mills, a former Thurmont resident and Catoctin High alum who had been directed to the band by a high school acquaintance.

That's when they christened themselves Masters of the Universe.

Prideful exuberance fueled by youth and anti-establishment coda?

“We're big He-Man fans,” said Kung.

“It's always hard to come up with a band name,” he said. “We formed the band around the same time I bought a huge He-Man toy collection – I tend to get nostalgic sometimes – and I was looking at the box and thought, ‘Masters of the Universe’... It's kind of hard to forget. We figure we'll use it until we get a letter from [their lawyers]

telling us to stop.”

While the band's fledgling days were filled playing barbecues and parties, it has since performed at Frederick establishments such as Firestone's and the WestSide Café, predominantly performing classic rock covers.

“Everything from Sublime to Jimi Hendrix,” said Kung. “We even do some Lynyrd Skynyrd, who's somewhat of a local favorite.”

“It all depends on our time slot and venue,” said Mills. “At Krug's, we'll probably play some rootsy rock – some Led Zeppelin or some Hendrix, while in urban venues we might throw in some Tracy Chapman. In other areas, we might play some 80s/90s pop. We've been known to do some Fine Young Cannibals. We don't always have a set list we follow straight through.”

Covers come in handy, too, when you don't have four hours of original material to rock with, said Kung.

That's quickly changing for the band, though, with the release of its debut album.

“Don't Block the Box” was a project 1 1/2 years in the making, Mills said, which coincided with the band's signing to Beechfields, a small, independent label out of Baltimore.

“It's not a traditional label,” Mills said. “No money is exchanged. Their main thing is promotion... They know how to get the word out about the band, and in return, we promote their helpfulness – their existence.”

“We signed to a label for a better sense of direction,” said Kung. “Often, in a band, it can be really easy to lose focus. Joining [Beechfields] gave us some goals. They're depending on us to provide them a product... It was a good move for us... They give us exposure, places to play... They spread the music.”

Ten original tracks and one Fiona Apple/Warren Zevon-sampled hybrid highlight the album, the title of which, said Kung, is up to interpretation.

“‘Don't Block the Box’ is a play on the signs all over D.C. regarding the crosswalks,” said Ryan.

Realizing the racier connotation of the phrasing, two separate album covers were designed by fellow Middletown grad, Mark Burrier.

“We [exerted] a little bit of sophomoric humor with that one,” Ryan said. “You can guess the double entendre.”

“Granted, our wives and girlfriends didn't care much for it,” Kung said.

Ninety-nine percent of Masters' offbeat lyrics are penned by Ryan, a voracious reader who has been inspired by various tomes – like the Cormac McCarthy flavored “Knoxville,” or the otherworldly “Disco Appalachia,” written after reading Ursula K. LeGuinn's “Always Coming Home,” he said.

The song's title itself — having nothing to do with the song, said Kung — was an homage to an intra-mural volleyball team.

Recorded entirely in Kung's basement, the album was the first step into a much larger realm for the band.

“It was a learning experience,” Mills said. “None of us knew what it would be like to

record an album. The fine details and intricacies... You can even hear the progression [from track to track] as we became better at recording and mastering... I'm already looking forward to our second album. I think it will be a much more streamlined process."

Although its members are currently scattered throughout Maryland – Ryan in Hagerstown, Mills in Baltimore, and Kung in Rockville – Masters of the Universe still considers itself a Frederick band.

"Our core group of fans is from Frederick," Kung said. "Our family and friends are still here. Anytime we have a show [in the area], we have a big turnout."

Kung said the band is toying with the idea of playing overseas – it has some friends in China – but time will tell. He recently purchased a home in the area and marriages, mortgages, and even medical school are all high priorities for its respective members.

"We're just going to play as much music as we can until we have real responsibilities," he said. "That's kind of the band motto."

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