

KINGS OF LEON

MECHANICAL BULL

The Kings of Leon hadn't even started to think about making a new album when they headed out to play shows in Australia and South Africa in late 2011. The four Followills -- singer/ guitarist Caleb, guitarist Matthew, drummer Nathan, bassist Jared -- had been on a fairly relentless grind for the preceding eight years, releasing five albums and touring the world dozens of times since emerging from Nashville in early 2003. They exhausted themselves to the point of needing a concrete break that summer, and they announced they'd be taking six months off after the Australia tour. The plan was to relax at home in Nashville -- hang out with their families, play golf, barbecue, and not even touch their instruments. But these Kings never can seem to let more than a few months pass without writing new songs: Caleb sat down in his hotel room in South Africa and penned a pair of tracks that set the tone for their new album, *Mechanical Bull*, and there wasn't really any stopping from there.

Those songs -- a powerful strutter called "Temple" that consolidates all the best elements of the band's first three albums into one of their most irresistible, signature-sounding bangers yet, and the soaring ballad "Comeback Story," which injects trademark Followill humor into its otherwise heartbreaking tone -- catalyzed an album that sounds like a more refined version of classic Kings. "We wanted to write songs that are like a little two and a half minute punch in the face," Nathan says of the eleven tunes on their sixth studio album, which clocks in at an all-too-brief 42 minutes. "We wanted to make a record that as soon as it's over, people want to play it again. I call this one our unofficial greatest hits, because it has a couple songs that will appeal to fans of every Kings of Leon album: If you're a Youth & Young Manhood fan, you're gonna love 'Family Tree,' because it's funky and dirty and nasty. If you're into A-ha Shake Heartbreak, you're gonna love 'Supersoaker.'"

After they returned home from South Africa, Caleb discovered a musical sweet spot pretty quickly. "Once I found out my wife was pregnant, I would cook all day and hang out with her, and then I'd put her to bed at night and go to my office," he says. "I have a little amp in there, and I'd sit there learning new chords and trying to push myself. I would know I was onto something good if the door would open and it was Lily going, 'What is THAT? Record that!' She got me a little recorder and I started to find this zone where you could paint a picture without it having to be about yourself. It's good to get to let your hair down a bit and lose yourself in a song."

The following year, Nathan and Caleb joined guitarist Matthew in the KoL dads club, welcoming baby daughters in December and July, respectively. But Caleb had continued amassing song ideas, and by the time the Followills got together last fall, he listened back to his demos and found close to twenty ideas he felt good about

presenting to the band. “I think Caleb was more surprised than any of us at how much we embraced the songs immediately,” says Nathan. “We went in the studio and he played like six of them in a row where we were like ‘YES!’”

“There are more layers to this album than there have been before,” says Jared, who names songs like the hard-driving “Don’t Matter” and a sweetly sad track called “Wait For Me” as personal favorites.

“We were all secretly paying attention to what people have been saying about us – our fans and what they wanted to hear,” Caleb says. “We didn’t want songs sounding alike. We wanted songs to be anthemic in a different way than they had been before. We didn’t want songs to be all stretched out and reverby; we wanted it a little raw. We wanted it to kind of feel like, at times you’re playing with the only amp you have and the only guitar you have and you gotta make it work.”

The recording process was all about making shit work: The Kings had purchased a building that used to be a paint factory in a neighborhood Nathan describes as “the Hell’s Kitchen of Nashville.” They figured they’d use it as a rehearsal space for a while, and eventually convert it into their own studio. But after only a couple weeks of rehearsals they felt ready to start making the new album. The Kings invited their longtime producer Angelo Petraglia to come hear what they were working on and told him, “We’re gonna do the album here.” “He was like, ‘no way we’ll ever be ready in time,’” Caleb says. “We were like, ‘we’re doing it HERE.’”

Since they hadn’t actually converted it into a studio yet, they didn’t have anything set up properly when they started *Mechanical Bull*, which they recorded over the course of eight weeks this winter with producer Petraglia and engineer James Brown. “What it looks like now compared to what it was, I would never have dreamed it,” adds Nathan. “It’s still only 50 percent done. The fact that we made our album there and it sounds as good as it does sonically is a miracle.”

“It was like our little clubhouse,” says Caleb. “The first month working in there, we didn’t even have furniture. It was the wild west – an open frontier. There was no right way or wrong way to do it, because it was the first record we’d done in there. But we did it, and honest to god it was so much fun.”

“I think taking a little break reminded us not just that we’re blessed to get to do what we do for a living at all,” says Nathan, “but it also reminded us of the type of music we can make when we’re all in the right headspace. Kings of Leon making a fun record, that’s what we are. That’s what made our fans fall in love with us in the first place.”

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