

Cage the Elephant

UNPEELED



You can't talk about music in this century without mentioning **Cage the Elephant**. They are the last of the great bands — or perhaps, based on new album *Unpeeled*, the first of the great new ones. They trace their nervy, seditious lineage from that same uncompromising place that gave us *Between the Buttons*-era Stones, the Pixies, the Stone Roses, the Velvet Underground and Iggy Pop.

In fact, it was as if Bowling Green, Kentucky's second-most famous export had been born full-blown and knowing when they first burst out on a stage in the early days of 2006, regurgitated whole out of the music's murky past with their platinum hair, sunglasses and Doc Martens. Mysterious, a little troubled, with an unstudied cool, a reckless charm and the striking looks of the young Yardbirds and the rakish confidence of the early Stones.

"We had this picture of what a rock 'n' roll band was supposed to be when we started," says vocalist Matt Shultz, who fronts the sextet

comprising brother Brad on rhythm guitar, drummer Jared Champion, bassist Daniel Tichenor, lead guitarist Nick Bockrath and keyboardist Matthan Minster. “In my younger years, I definitely tried to play into personas that often hindered the material’s ability to be truly effective. Then as years passed I started wanting to shed some of that creative baggage.”

That might have been the most important lesson the band learned working with Dan Auerbach, who produced Cage’s 2015 Grammy-winning *Tell Me I’m Pretty* album. He helped them chip away at all the things that stood between them and their songs, uncovering their own raw power. “The biggest thing we’ve done in the past few years is to rein in the need to heap every idea we have onto a song,” explains Brad.

Which meant a radical jettisoning of conventional notions of what a band should be. Cage lost all the posing, the affectations, the overweening affection for ‘80s and ‘90s punk, the desire to be anyone else except who *they* were, stripping everything down to bare-bones essentials: strong, uncomplicated songwriting; an understated yet wicked intelligence; lyrical eccentricity; a brutish rhythmic center; and the kind of abandon that propels Matt headlong into a writhing crowd often.

Why? Because he *is* Cage’s audience, a tilted mirror for all the fans concerned with the same things Cage the Elephant sing about. Questions of self-doubt, creative dissatisfaction, isolation, identity, uncertain love and an even more uncertain future.

“When I look over the crowd every single night, I start to remember that we’re so intimately connected to our audience. I tend to write songs about pretty heavy things, and when I see these kids out there singing them as if they’d written them themselves, I realized the

songs resonate with them because they've had very similar experiences, and they identify with us," says Matt.

"We're not massive pop stars that a lot of people flock to because it's the most popular flavor. People who listen to our music listen to it because they've had a real connection with it. When I see those kids, it makes it really easy to perform for them, and to connect live. And to want to become even more transparent in what we do. I'm not saying it's easy. I think human nature's tendency is to try to cover and camouflage ourselves, but the truth always finds *me*," Matt continues with a laugh. "Even if I try to hide from myself. So why not try to start off being honest?"

After Cage the Elephant performed at Neil Young's 2016 Bridge Show Benefit, they gained a new appreciation the songs they've been writing and performing for the past 11 years.

"For the Bridge School benefit, you have to go totally acoustic," says Brad Shultz. "So we had the idea of adding strings and a whole lot of different acoustic elements to the show to make it a little bit more interesting than just six guys with acoustic guitars on a stage. But after playing that show, it became very apparent that we needed to take it a little bit further with that kind of approach."

They took that idea to nine cities, where they played acoustically on what they called Live & Unpeeled tour, recording the shows in cities including Los Angeles, Washington, Knoxville and Nashville, ending up with 18 songs from the band's past four albums as well as three retooled existing songs, performed live and stripped down — in some cases with a string quartet and small choir.

"It was really all about the balance of the intimacy and the delicacy of how we approach playing these songs live acoustically and with

strings,” says Brad Shultz “We found the more honest we could be with ourselves, the more honest we could be with everyone else.

“I think with the bigger shows you’re exchanging energy with the crowd and losing yourself in the moment, overwhelmed with all the energy. Playing this way, you find yourself more overwhelmed with the songs, and it’s more like you’re *finding* yourself in the moment,” continues Brad.

So overwhelmed that the band decided to turn those shows into an album.

“I always wanted to make a record that captured what was happening in the moment,” says Matt. “There are many times in the studio where you *don’t* necessarily capture a song exactly the way that you’d envisioned it. So this was an opportunity for us to go back to some of these songs and not necessarily rerecord them and totally reimagine them, but add some things that maybe we would have, had we had the time and resources in the past. Many times you’re adding sonic layers looking for something to hide behind, and what you don’t realize is that that vulnerability and that nakedness might be the most compelling and interesting thing about the song. Kinda like people who like to watch any kind of sporting event: everyone knows that accidents are more far more interesting than someone doing something perfect.

“I’m really excited about the future,” Matt continues. “I think everyone in our group is going through a hyper-growth period in life, absorbing a lot. And a lot of the fear that held us back is starting to be lifted.

“You have people who run after the gold rush of purely electronic music, and then you have fundamentalists that refuse to try anything outside of what they know. I think the great things that

stood out through history are the ones that embrace it all. And that's where I see music moving next, not purely electronic and not purely fundamental, but embracing creativity and using whatever tool is in front of you. That's where we are as a band in mind and spirit, and that's what's so exciting right now for us."

The band took the inspiration for the new album's title from the Velvet Underground's first album.

"We needed to find a title that felt right and one that felt classic, too. You are always inspired by what's come before you, and we've always been huge fans of the Stones and of Velvet Underground, and so when we came up with *Unpeeled* we're like oh, that's badass, that sounds like the banana on the cover of the first Velvet Underground album (*Velvet Underground & Nico*). Mostly, we were trying to find something that was descriptive enough, that said something about what we were doing -- the stripping back, the transparency -- and at the same time was still a nod to the heroes that we loved."

Cage the Elephant's purity of purpose and impulse to communicate what can only be felt beat as steadily in their hearts as they did for the Velvet Underground on the gritty streets of New York in the mid-1960s.

"I definitely believe that music is spiritual, and I think that its most interesting characteristic is in its ability to express what's unseen. To tell the truth, I believe in the power of honesty, no matter how uncomfortable it might be. It's a universal strength that overpowers just about anything. Truth always comes out; it just depends on how long it takes," says Matt.

Jaan Uhelszki