

KING ELEMENTARY TO RELEASE *KUDZU* JULY 26

Sometimes, what with all the endless retro revivalism, reunion tours too numerous to name and rock's wealthy elders filling arenas at \$300+ a head, it's easy to forget that at its basic core, rock 'n' roll is music for the young (if often only young at heart). Thus when a scrappy, youthful act blasts out of the gate while still in their teens, the knee-jerk response is too often to dismiss them or at best greet 'em with skepticism. "What do they know about rock 'n' roll?" the pundits will go. "They're just kids! Amateurs! Maybe in five years they'll be worth our attention, but now? Hmmmph!"

Such snivelers are fools, and all it takes is one listen to *Kudzu* by King Elementary to prove it. Delirious in the squall that can be generated by the simple interface of two guitars, bass and drums, the album broadsides you with a bracing passion and defiance. Combining elements of neo grunge with classic angst rock, emo, butt-shakin' maximum R&B and a '60s sense of pop melody, the songs lie crouching and then pounce, bullshit-free yet full of nerve. It's drunk with swaggering, snarly youth -- yet on first pass, it sounds, quite honestly, like a band with more years and miles behind them than their ages would suggest.

The four gifted lads comprising this Jackson, Mississippi combo come to our attention fresh out of high school -- two of them just graduating this spring, in fact -- but they've been cranking it out together since they were 14 and 15 years old. As is often the case, their beginnings are as mundane as life in everyday Southern suburbia would suggest.

Seventh grade metalheads Morgan Jones (guitar, vocals) and Will Randolph (bass and vocals) would often clash with two Blink-182 fans in the next grade up, Jeremy Upton (lead guitar) and Andrew Fox (drums). "We were young and we liked bad music," laughs Jones. "I was like, 'Those guys are pussies!' I can remember getting in verbal arguments with them at 7th and 8th grade dances and stuff."

Eventually the two factions made up, all ending up in the same band together by the end of 2001. Initially, their tentative musical repertoire consisted entirely of cover songs -- mostly material by At The Drive-In and The Strokes, two newer groups they had discovered. "I was too scared to show [the other members] my songs," Jones explains. "Then one day we were practicing, and I started playing one of my songs. Andrew was like, 'Hey, that sounds good -- what was that?!'"

Switching the focus to original material, by the summer of '02 they had about a dozen new compositions written. Then called The Symptoms, they were favorites at their school, playing dances and other events, but when they tried to go "legit" and get gigs at the local clubs, they got that ol' dismissive brush-off routine. "I was like 15," says Jones. "That whole summer we couldn't get a show at all, and we were all real pissed about it. But it was actually really good, 'cause we just practiced every day. We didn't have anything else to do, so we just played for three months, every day, playing these songs until they were just ingrained in our brains."

Finally in October, one Jackson club gave the boys a show, and among those walking away impressed was Jeremy's cousin, local producer Matt Pleasant. The band's self-released CD *Ready to Burn* was subsequently recorded at Pleasant's place, and made it into the hands of various major label A&R reps. A well-received showcase at The Viper Room resulted in August '03. "We had played maybe 20 shows or something at that point. So it was weird," admits Jones, "but also great and unbelievable..."

As the buzz began to build, they determined that a name change was in order. And as clichéd as it may seem, their revamped moniker came to Jones in a dream! Best of all, it's a dream that makes little sense. Recounting his fateful slumber vision, Jones tells of chasing some hideous, murderous monster who "was killing people and eatin' their faces – totally like a hilariously bad horror movie." Cornering the creep in a sewer, Jones is assured by the cannibal that his face-eating days are over. "'I would've continued,' he said, 'but I was stopped by four men, and their names were King Elementary!' I have no idea what that means," admits Jones, "but it sounded like a good name for our band. I wish it had just been my grammar school so I wouldn't have to tell that story all the time..."

Meanwhile, at a beer-soaked show in Jackson, where their local following seemingly compounds itself daily, they earned another fan in noted producer Dennis Herring (Modest Mouse, Buddy Guy, Camper Van Beethoven), who was impressed enough to ask the young band to record with him and release their first album as King Elementary on his independent Sweet Tea label. Recorded in Oxford over nights and weekends the following year – interrupted when Elvis Costello stopped in to record *The Delivery Man* with Herring – the result is *Kudzu*, the dynamic disc you're holding right now.

While a few cuts on *Kudzu*, such as guitarist Upton's personal favorite -- the prowling, powerful "Hit the Mirror" – are recent conceptions, "most of [the songs] are from when we were *The Symptoms*," Jones emphasizes, including the slammin' opening track, "For the Birds," whose careening, garagey rhythms dive headlong into an groovy chorus that'll still be stuck in your craw when the summer winds into fall. "That was like the third song we wrote or something," reveals Jones, who celebrated his 18th birthday in April. "This album is our adolescence -- that's what it represents."

As for all the major label interest, return trips to Los Angeles and New York for more showcases and meetings have apparently paid off. They ultimately signed with Capitol Records in the fall of '04.

"I told [Capitol] we wanted to record in Mississippi, and they were totally fine with that," shares Jones, a star pitcher and third baseman on his high school baseball team. "It's grounding to be here in Jackson. And that's what we value, and that's what we're trying to do – I'm just trying to keep it in perspective."

On the other hand, Morgan, Jeremy, Will and Andrew are gearing up for Sweet Tea's July release of *Kudzu* (through a licensing deal with Atlanta-based Terminus Records) and the loaded touring itinerary that will follow. "I could be happy to be on the road for

the rest of this year, personally,” offers Jones, realizing that Kudzu will be most of America’s first taste of King Elementary, and that it’s only the beginning.

“Most of the time when people are 17 and 18 and 19, like we are, kids get depressed and they don’t know what they’re gonna do,” confesses Jones. “Playing that first Viper Room show was such a valuable experience to me, because it was the ultimate confirmation and realization of my dream, and what I want to do. It confirmed that this is what I’m gonna do, one way or another...and we’ve been handed the opportunity to do it.

“This never happens. We’re really fortunate. We know that. And we work our asses off, [but] I’m still convinced it’s not happening. I mean, shit, I’m sitting here in Jackson, Mississippi with two eight-page papers to write for tomorrow!”

-Jeff Clark

Editor: Stomp & Stammer