

**A Conversation with Nathan Followill of Kings of Leon**  
**by Frank Goodman (5/2007, Puremusic.com)**

The story of the Followill brothers and the Kings of Leon reads like a very far-fetched epic in the making. After all, how could three brothers who spent their childhoods going from place to place in the family Oldsmobile with their preacher daddy at the wheel end up starting the only band they were ever in and end up on tour in a few short years with U2? That's *much* farther fetched than *The Replacements* or *Almost Famous*, come on.

But that's what happened, and the saga has only begun. Their universally raved upon debut EP, *Holy Roller Novocaine*, quickly established them as one of *the* American bands to watch. Some of that EP reappeared on the first full-length release, *Youth and Young Manhood*.

I met a very colorful character in Nashville around the time of that first EP, named Angelo Petraglia. He was a great songwriter from the Boston area who had seen some success with cuts by Kim Richey and then Trisha Yearwood and Martina McBride. I'd heard that he'd somehow taken this young band under his wing and was writing with them and kind of whipping them into shape as a band, exposing them to essential rock and roll bands like The Rolling Stones and The Faces.

Angelo is still very important in the evolution of this now very important act (as is co-producer Ethan Johns), who actually represent something like a *real band* in this bizarre age where people who spin records or others who with little or no perceivable musical talent bust a few rhymes to sampled tracks are considered the geniuses and iconoclasts of the day.

The second album *Aha Shake Heartbreak* fueled the fire that had caught across the pond and the UK became the greatest audience for this now essential US act. The new album *Because Of The Times* debuted at #1 in the UK. It is a grand departure sonically from the earlier releases, greatly influenced by the world-touring with The Strokes and especially U2 and the need and the drive to write much bigger sounding music that would hit and resound in all the corners of the huge venues that had become their destiny.

Along with their cousin Matthew Followill on lead guitar, drummer and elder Nathan Followill, singer and rhythm guitarist Caleb, and bassist Jared Followill have a brilliantly received new disc on their hands with a bolder sound, and are about to take the globe anew by storm. We talked recently with Nathan as they geared up for the Kings of Leon world tour.

**Puremusic:** Nathan, I really like this new record. And it's really a beautiful departure from the previous records.

**Nathan Followill:** Oh, man, thank you very much.

**PM:** It's always interesting when a band, big or small, evolves in a certain way, and seems to take a left turn. Maybe you could describe that turn to me, how it came about, or maybe even why.

**NF:** Man, I don't know. I think when we first started out, we were so young, and the first two records were pretty much us going in there and just doing the best that we could do, as far as the writing and the production and all that. And this record was a result of just being a band for five years, and growing from day one. It's the first band any of us have ever been in, so we've had the luxury of growing from day one, and--

**PM:** That's unbelievable. It's the first band that any of you were in?

**NF:** Yeah.

**PM:** That's amazing.

**NF:** I think the U2 tour really planted a lot of seeds in our head, as far as the direction we wanted to go on this record, as far as big sounding songs, and songs that would sound good in Madison Square Garden. Because U2 would get up there every night in these huge places that weren't made for music and just make the place sound so amazing. And that kind of intrigued us a little to try to make music that was big sounding. This is the first record that we knew exactly what we wanted to do, and told Ethan and Angelo what sounds we wanted, and they found them for us, and here we are.

**PM:** Wow. So with that big sound in mind, how is the songwriting actually happening? How does that process go down? Who comes--

**NF:** Caleb is the lyricist. Yeah, but the way he writes, it's kind of weird. He just sits back and observes stuff. And he'll sing you a song that he wrote about something you did four nights ago that you don't even remember.

**PM:** [laughs]

**NF:** And he's a storyteller. He loves Townes Van Zandt and Roger Miller, and people like that.

**PM:** Isn't that amazing? He's a Townes, Roger Miller type guy.

**NF:** Yeah.

**PM:** And yet the way it comes out, of course, is another sonic universe. And it's funny how some of the lyrics will read more linearly than others. Some of them will seem like they make sense line to line, others are like more abstract.

**NF:** Yeah, I don't know, whatever vibe he's feeling, he goes with the flow. He definitely hasn't pigeonholed himself into any one form of writing, by any means.

**PM:** And then how does the music part of the songwriting go down?

**NF:** Ah, man, this record we had songs that started from a bass line, songs that started from a drum beat, Caleb whistling a tune, or Matt playing a riff that was driving us crazy so we wrote a song around it. There's no formula for us, as far as songwriting goes.

**PM:** That's beautiful.

**NF:** We just kind of go with the flow.

**PM:** Yeah, that's the way to do it. I dig this deeper darker sound on this record. And it's just a result of, as you say, being a band for five years and going out with people like U2, who can fill every corner of a huge stadium, or what should have been an airplane hangar, or something.

**NF:** Yeah.

**PM:** It's unbelievable.

Besides being out on tour with them, are there any records that the band is listening to a lot for inspiration or direction, any record that's on the turntable, or on the stereo a lot?

**NF:** Not really. We had just gotten off the road, and we were going to take three months off just to chill. And three weeks later we were so bored. And we were just so out of the loop musically. We just came home and kind of decompressed after three and a half, four years on the road, solid. We just didn't do much of nothing but play golf and drink beer, pretty much.

**PM:** So you were really out for what amounted to years?

**NF:** Oh, yeah. Me and Caleb bought a lake house when we first signed our deal. And in the first few years we slept in it I think 48 nights.

**PM:** Wow... I think you guys live down the road from me, in Mt. Juliet somewhere, or thereabouts.

**NF:** Yeah. We live near Lebanon, not far.

**PM:** Oh, that's nice, yeah. So as the elder, do you take any kind of leadership role, or does Caleb as the singer? Or is the approach just kind of democratic, or--

**NF:** Yeah. It's a lot better now. At first it was kind of funny, my little brother coming and telling me that he's going home with some girl, or something, and getting the brotherly approval--

[laughter]

**NF:** That was funny at first. But I guess as the oldest I'm always going to be kind of looking around the bar--I like to know where everybody is at. Yeah, it's pretty much democratic. Everyone has their say-so, and we go with--not necessarily majority rules, but intelligence rules, I guess.

**PM:** Yeah, everybody gets heard.

**NF:** Yeah.

**PM:** So what role did the co-producers, Ethan and Angelo, play on this record? How did they do their thing?

**NF:** Man, they're great. They're a great duo. They work really well with us, just in the sense that Ethan is so good with all the technical stuff, and he just knows his shit. And he's really good at, once he gets the idea down, and the kind of record you're wanting to make, and the kind of sounds you're wanting to get, I mean, it's almost like his mission to get you exactly what you're hearing in your head to be put down on tape.

**PM:** That's beautiful. The mission to find that sound.

**NF:** That's right. And Angelo is more of just a cool cat, and just, man, makes us want to go in there and record every day, because he lets us do the front side of making music. This record, we had so much fun doing this record. We were so chilled out because we were doing the record at home here in Nashville. After being on the road for so long touring and stuff, the fact that we got to come home and not only get to sleep in our bed every night, and drink at our favorite watering hole, and all that shit, but got to make a record while we were getting to enjoy all the perks of being at home. So this record didn't seem like work at all. It was like playtime.

**PM:** Yeah, Angelo, I know him just a bit from around town. He's a really soulful dude.

**NF:** Yeah, he's a good guy, he's got a good soul. He brings good vibes, for sure.

**PM:** I know he was there from the top, really. And he's grown with the band in a way that still continues to work. That's pretty amazing, really, when a band changes so much after five years, and the guy who was kind of there as a coach or something right at the top is still there on album number three, and everybody says, "Yep, he's still the guy."

**NF:** Yeah, he's still the man. He kind of tutored me and Caleb in songwriting. He was the first person that taught us how to write a song that we'd actually be proud to play on stage.

**PM:** Wow.

**NF:** And luckily, as our songwriting skills have progressed, he might not necessarily have the same role as far as songwriting, but we definitely wanted to keep him in the team, whether it be helping produce, or just being there and helping us find great sounds and try shit that we would never in a million years think of trying.

**PM:** I haven't been fortunate to catch the band live. What kind of amps are you guys up with? I used to be very into the amp game, so that's interesting to me.

**NF:** Matthew plays an Ampeg Reverb Rocket, I think is what it's called. And Caleb plays--I think it's a Vox.

**PM:** Beautiful. So you guys, I mean, are totally living the rock 'n' roll dream. Is there anything missing?

**NF:** No, man. We've taken some time off and been able to chill out here. We're about ready to get back to enjoying the perks of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, for sure.

**PM:** [laughs] What do your folks think about the unbelievable shit that's happened for you guys?

**NF:** Oh, they're super proud.

**PM:** Of course, right?

**NF:** We come from a great family. They'd have been proud--anything we did together, they were proud of. So, yeah, they're very supportive, very loving. They're getting a little too comfortable, now, like having a box of the CDs sent to their house that they promised everybody they've met in the last six months that they would have their boys sign it for them.

**PM:** [laughs] Where are they living?

**NF:** Well, my mom lives in Lebanon, and my dad lives in Oklahoma City.

**PM:** Oh, your mom is down the road, that's great. Do you like living in Nashville, and do you get--I don't know how to say it--do you feel like you get the respect you're due in your hometown?

**NF:** I love living in Nashville. We all love it. It's great. It's a good place to come off the road to. All of our friends, they live in L.A. and New York and stuff. And the last thing I want to do when I come off the road from three years is to go to a party every single night, or just you get caught up in the whole scene, and you never really take a break on yourself. I mean, either you've got to slow down or your body is going to slow down whether you want it to or not. So we like living in Nashville. L.A. and New York are a plane ride away.

**PM:** Exactly. Yeah, they're not far away. It's well documented, of course, that you guys grew up sons of a preacher. Are any of you spiritual in any way today, or even religious?

**NF:** Yeah, we all believe in God, for sure. I think we all still have a lot of the morals that were instilled in us growing up. We're no saints, by no means.

**PM:** It's early for that.

**NF:** I like to think we're good people and have good hearts, I guess.

**PM:** Anybody have a political bone in their body, or not really?

**NF:** No, not really. Bono and Eddie Vedder I think saw me and Caleb as the next great leaders of the musical political front--no, I'm joking.

**PM:** [laughs]

**NF:** No, not really. This is the first election that the whole band could actually vote.

**PM:** Wow. That's a trip.

**NF:** Yeah, I don't know, man. None of us are super political.

**PM:** Not so much, yeah.

**NF:** I watch my fair share of Fox and CNN.

**PM:** What about reading? You personally, or does the band make time for that much on the road, or at home?

**NF:** Yeah. I do more comfort reading. I'll read the same book 50 times just because it makes me feel good and reminds me of the way I felt the first time I read it.

**PM:** I don't think I've ever heard that phrase before, "comfort reading." That makes a lot of sense to me.

**NF:** Like a favorite song that you like, that takes you back.

**PM:** Yeah, or a certain food.

**NF:** Yeah, anything. I like *Catcher in the Rye*. That's probably one of my all-time favorites.

**PM:** Wow, that's the one you'll do over and over again.

**NF:** Yeah.

**PM:** Where does it feel like the band is the biggest, Nathan, is it the UK, or is it home?

**NF:** I would say we're a little bigger over there. But it's getting close. America is getting really close. I think we're playing for 28,000 in three nights in London. We couldn't do that anywhere in America, I don't think. We're to the point now where we can play for a couple thousand kids in any city in the world, not just America, but in the world. And that's all any band could ever ask for, is to sell enough records to keep making records, and to sell enough tickets to make enough money to keep touring.

**PM:** Absolutely. Do you, or does the band, have any feeling, pro or con, about hip-hop or rap?

**NF:** I like the beat, for sure. No, we like all kinds of music. So I'm sure there are a couple of Jay-Z songs we dig out there.

**PM:** What about country?

**NF:** Oh, I'm a country freak. I probably listen to that more than anything. The band will kill me for saying that, but--

**PM:** [laughs]

**NF:** --I listen to country more than any other, especially on the road. That's another comfort thing. And to hear country music while you're in Germany, oh, my Lord, amazing.

**PM:** You know if you're in a room in Germany and you start singing "Country Roads," people lose their frickin' minds.

**NF:** Yeah.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, it's unbelievable. You can be in any room in Germany and start whistling that song, people will just start walking over to you and start singing it. It's unbelievable.

**NF:** Yeah.

**PM:** So are you happier on or off the road?

**NF:** When I'm home, I'm happier on the road. When I'm on the road, I'm happier home. There's no happy medium. That's a double-edged sword right there. We love to play shows, we love to tour. And luckily for us we've kind of figured out a way to keep our sanity on the road.

**PM:** Yeah, tricky.

**NF:** Yeah, I mean, it's great. Stay at a decent hotel, and treat yourself to a decent meal every night. I've played golf on the most beautiful courses all over the world on off days. You got to keep your sanity on the road. You got to do whatever you got to do to keep it fun and interesting.

**PM:** It's unreal. So you guys have toured with some of the hugest acts in history already. Is there somebody you'd like to share a bill or a tour with that's not happened yet?

**NF:** I don't know. We've got a couple big ones that are wanting to do stuff, but we don't know if we're going to do it or not. I don't know, man, if there could be another band that we'd want to play with--I mean, shit, I have no idea. Like Buck Owens, if he was alive.

**PM:** [laughs] That's funny. What about non-musical things? Is there something personally that you'd like to try that you've not had the time or the wherewithal to attempt yet?

**NF:** Man, I don't know. I pretty much do everything that I want to do. I don't know. I'd like to climb a mountain with somebody, like for real.

**PM:** Wow. So now a huge tour begins for you guys in England, behind this already well-received third record. What's the feeling in the band and inside yourself as you get ready to do that?

**NF:** Here we go again. Oh, Lord. We're excited. I mean, we did this record--we started it last April. It came out a year and one day after we started it. So we've been sitting on it for a while--it's kind of like sitting on a big old bag of popcorn that sits on the bus, and you're just holding your breath. And it's out there now, and it's being well received, from what we're hearing. So man, that's great, we're so thrilled that people are enjoying the fruits of our labor.

**PM:** Yeah, and enjoying the new direction. And four stars in the *Rolling Stone*, et cetera. And everybody is giving it the thumbs up. It's very nice of you, Nathan, to give me some time today. You guys are busy guys, and I look forward to seeing the band live, soon. And maybe if I see you around town, I'll come over and introduce myself.

**NF:** Yeah, for sure, man.

**PM:** You take care, Nathan. And thanks.