

BEN FOLDS FIVE

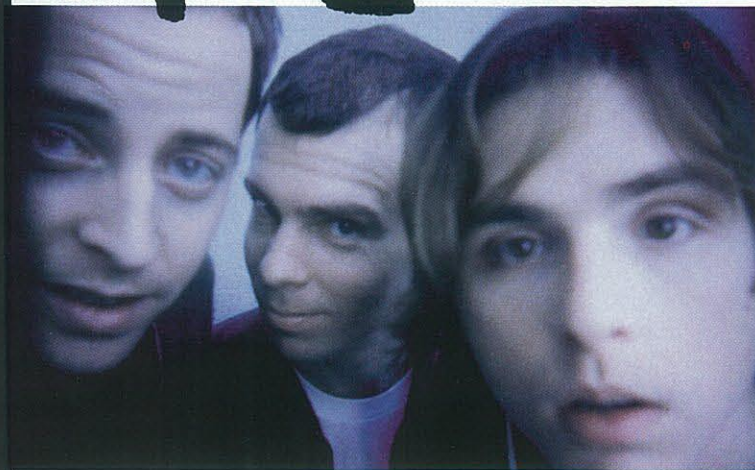
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Three extremely talented guys, three extraordinary voices that join together in flawless harmony song after song, one drum kit, one bass rig, and a baby grand piano. Ben Folds Five—pure pop perfection.

I take this band very seriously. Before we get to my recent conversation with Ben Folds, I offer this brief history of my acquaintance with the group, in an attempt to convey what it is about them that gets me so excited.

It was mid-1995. At the time, I was doing mornings at KSCA, the now-defunct Adult Rock station in Los Angeles. One day I picked up a disc simply titled *Ben Folds Five*. The cover featured piano keys, and inside were some black and white photos, including one of a guy standing on top of a baby grand, singing.

OK, I was intrigued.



by Nicole Sandler

I put it in my car CD player on the way home, where it lived for many months. Honestly, I couldn't remember being this excited about a new band—ever. Over the course of the next few months I hounded my PD to the point where he finally added "Where's Summer B?" (and later "Alice Childress"), and even invited them to play our Christmas Toys For Tots benefits, fm 101.9 Unwrapped.

I still take particular pride in that...as I do everything about Ben Folds Five. Not that I have any right to that pride. Basically, I heard a record that impressed the shit out of me—one of those rare treats of which I simply couldn't get enough—and wanted to play it for anyone and everyone I could.

So, as a person who completely gets off on turning people on to new music, I'm absolutely orgasmic over the success that Ben Folds Five is finally enjoying. In case you couldn't tell, I love being able to say, "I told you so!"

So, to all of you who are just getting around to discovering what I consider to be the best band of the decade, well...you know...

Along with the critical acclaim for Ben Folds Five came industry recognition. Yes, there were lots of industry-ites with ears at major labels who wanted to woo them from Caroline's fold. 550 Music won the war—and Ben Folds Five's major label debut, *Whatever And Ever Amen*, was released in March of 97. Since its release, their only West Coast dates had been an opening slot for Counting

Crows and an appearance as part of the H.O.R.D.E. tour. Finally, they had two headlining dates in Southern California scheduled for early December, shortly after MTV, VH-1 and (finally) KROQ added "Brick!"

Though he has since become a good friend, Ben and I sat for our first actual interview since he visited me on the air on his first trip to LA.

Well, when the first album came out there were many of us who were in love with it. You actually played our Christmas show back in 1995. And you're laughing 'cause it wasn't the best experience for Ben Folds Five.

"Horrible, it wasn't your fault. It was the techs at Universal Amphitheatre's fault, the union guys got paid a little too much that night."

I specifically remember right after you guys came off stage and one of the stagehands yelled at you for stepping on the piano.

"Yeah. He liked the "F" word a lot."

And I'm standing back there wanting to protect you, and here's this mean old man who's probably worked at Universal Amphitheatre for 30 years, yelling at you.

"You know what really irked him, though, is he wasn't gonna put a nice microphone on, a singing microphone. For some reason he took the nice one

off that he had for someone else and put this crappy one on. I asked him if he could put the nice one on there, and he couldn't do it 'cause it was someone else's job to put it back on...and then when they put it back on he goes, 'Don't break it!' After they didn't ever get it up in the mix and they never got my piano up in the mix, I took it and started playing the keys with it."

But you do that anyway.

"I did it a little harder that night, actually."

Well, you've come a long way since then. Back then you were traveling in that little Ryder truck.

"Now we're traveling in a big Ryder truck."

No, now you're traveling in a big decked-out bus with two VCR's and a satellite dish and stuff, I saw that thing.

"Yeah, it's cool."

Big time. Well, the Ryder truck was quite unique. How did that come about; when you first started touring you just bought this old Ryder truck?

"Yeah, because if we were renting for a show, it would be like \$35 to rent a truck, right, and then it'd be like another \$30 to tune the piano. And we moved it ourselves, so our overhead was \$60 or \$70, which isn't that bad. But then as the shows started adding up, and we'd play five or six a week, it got worse. So we realized if we bought a truck that'd make it easier. So we made payments on the truck and the piano."

Knowing we were gonna do this interview, I went on the Web and found probably 20 fan-generated Web pages in addition to the official Sony one. You've got some pretty loyal fans out there. Do you spend any time on the Internet at all?

"No, the only times I've ever been on the computer is over at your house, and our tour manager has a computer and I look over his shoulder sometimes. I don't think I've ever really typed on one."

Wow, well maybe we'll get you on-line. So, anyway, I'm looking through all these Web sites and stuff, reading about Ben Folds Five and checking out all the fan stuff, and there is a discussion in the Ben Folds Five newsgroup about "Brick" and what the song is about. You've been quoted as saying the song's self-explanatory—which I believe, too. I think I know what the meaning is. But I was surprised at how many people really didn't get it. Can I ask the obvious? "Brick" is about a woman, or actually a young couple, who get an abortion...is that right?

"Yes, that's correct."

I got it, but...

"You should be honored, I've never answered that question before."

I am honored.

"In the whole year that's been a song I've never said that. But I kind of wanted to let the song get out there and do its thing and let people read it like they

wanted to, so it didn't become an issue song, 'cause that's such an issue with people. Well, it should be, I guess, but at the same time, sometimes that can take precedent over the song. You know, people come up and they're like, 'What's it about, what's it about?' and I think, 'I'm not telling you.'"

So is that why you said it was self-explanatory, to let people figure it out for themselves?

"Yeah, I mean, I know what it's about...you just got it. But hopefully a song does more than that anyway. You can write an essay about that [abortion], people make speeches about that; so what? A song shows you where else things go besides just the obvious."

It's really a magnificent song. To me, a truly great song is marked by its ability to move something inside of you, to elicit a physical response. From the first time I sat down and really listened to "Brick" 'til today, it will move me to tears. It still does. I just saw the video for the first time, yesterday, in the bus, sitting with Darren. I told him that, and he asked me where—at what point in the song—it happens. As I watched the video, I was able to pinpoint it—where the song builds, I guess it's the bridge, when you get to the part where he broke down and she broke down—and that's where, every time, the tears will start coming. You were able to capture a really difficult, painful slice of life which, luckily, I've never lived, but so many people have—and you got what they go through.

"That was the last one written for the album, actually. Like in the last two or three days of recording."

The first time I heard it, I didn't hear all the lyrics and it still hit me, just from the sound and the tone of it. Are you surprised that that's the one that all of a sudden is breaking through?

"No, we kind of figured as much when we started the album. We wanted to start with singles that resembled what we'd been doing, what we were doing live, and not just make this big sudden shift, and kind of give ourselves mostly time to grow into it. 'Cause when we first started playing that song live it was terrible. We just couldn't get it back, what we had done in the studio...and now I think we have our moments where we get it, which is cool."

Well, I saw you last night, in Redondo Beach, just south of Los Angeles, and when you played "Brick," such a hush fell over the crowd. It got so quiet you literally could hear every breath. People just shut up and listened, and gave you the respect that that song deserves.

"Yeah, that's one really nice thing about the West Coast."

Are they more polite?

"I think so, yeah."

Well, we'll see about tonight, 'cause you're in LA now—it's heavy industry in this town and they're really rude.

"We're from the East Coast, we can handle it."

So now the question is, what single do you come with as the follow-up to "Brick?"

"I don't know, I think the one everyone's talking about is "...Dumped."

Which is also a great song, and the reaction that one gets is amazing as well. You played "Song For The Dumped" at our Christmas show way back when.

"Yeah, I think we'd just written it."

"Brick" will probably cross over and become a huge Top 40/AC hit, but there's no way those stations are gonna touch "Dumped." Or maybe they'll prove me wrong and I'll be the happiest, well, second-happiest person around.

"I think that's the idea, too—that since we kind of came from where we came from, that as we go out of the album, we kind of go out with something that's where we came from, if that makes any sense."

It does, and it would be poetic justice too, 'cause I love the fact that on the album you follow "Brick" with "Dumped."

(laughing) "It's wrong!"

Yeah, but it works! I mostly listen in my car, and I'm almost pathetic with these tears running down my face from "Brick," and then all of a sudden you come in with "Dumped" and you gotta...

"It's kind of like 'get over it, lady'."

Yeah! All right, so you're on the bus, what music are you listening to?

"Belle and Sebastian I like a lot. What else? Flaming Lips, a lot of Flaming Lips. I've been listening to old records, like Nick Drake and Rickie Lee Jones records and stuff like that. And I went through a Rage Against The Machine phase again a couple months ago."

Travis and Old Pike have been opening for you; tonight's the last night of this leg of the tour. Why those two bands?

"What I like about both these bands is that they're very unassuming. People have been so concerned over the last however many years with innovating in music, which isn't necessarily...I mean, innovation is great, but innovation is usually something that happens by accident, or it's a by-product of something else that's real—and people are so concerned with that. I love techno music, too, I really like the Prodigy a shitload, I think they're a great band, but I just like bands that, when you listen to the inside of what they're doing, it's more about the heart than it is about the invention, and so that's just the kind of mood I'm in right now."

But you're an innovator. I mean, how many rock bands are out there without a guitar?

"Yeah, but I don't think the conclusions we're coming to with the instruments that we've got is all that innovative, and if it is, that's great. I think the great innovations happen, you know, and people realize it later on anyway. I mean, Led Zeppelin is just a blues band, right? But it wasn't, it was

something else. Elvis Costello is just like some, you know, retro guy, and so I'm real suspicious when people start marketing stuff as, like, the bigger, better, newer, faster, stronger, louder. Who gives a shit? Not me."

Old Pike is not signed. They were a band you found in the Midwest?

"Yeah, they're a great band. What I really like about them is that they're like 20 years old, and they've got this thing that people 20 years old don't normally have hold of, and it just really impressed me. I thought it was really cool, and I thought it'd just be cool to put them on the road and let them do their thing in front of more than 50 people."

I was very impressed with them last night. And I was curious to hear them, 'cause I had never heard anything about them before, other than that you put them on for just that reason, that you liked them.

"Yeah, both bands. We've been really lucky. Did you see us with Komeda opening from Sweden?"

No.

"I don't think we came this far with them. They're really cool. We've done so many tours, we just haven't come out here that much. Komeda, great band."

You've been spending way too much time with Robert and Darren; I honestly don't know how you guys do it, spending all that time on the bus, nonstop touring, you really haven't taken much of a break since *Whatever And Ever Amen* came out.

"You can't be people around each other after that much time, you know, that's the thing. Everyone in the band is much different than the other guys in the band see them as, you know what I mean? It's like you walk in, you go, 'Well, there's that guy,' you know you've seen that guy every day for however long, and it's cool that we actually get along. We just don't get along—I mean I think all bands are like that—it's like business at this point. You see someone every day, it's unnatural, you know."

And not only do you see them every day and work with them, but you live with them and sleep with them and eat with them and you have to...

"Well, I haven't done that yet, but..."

Well, in close quarters anyway.

"We get along just fine. I mean everyone's pretty sharp, so it's okay."

Have you been writing for the next record?

"Yeah, I've got some songs and the guys have some ideas and we've got some stuff. I think we're pretty good collaborators when we put our minds to it. I mean, 'Brick' was a collaboration, that was me and Darren."

What do you want to do that you haven't done? What's your biggest professional fantasy?

"Wow, I don't know. Just in music, I think I'm fine. I mean, I'd like to see us get in there—there's a bunch of bands in the realm of, like...it's almost like postcards or E-mail or something. It's like, a band

puts an album out, and then another band gets competitive about it and puts out a response, and I think that's fun, when you start hitting greatness like that. We haven't made—I won't say that, I won't say we haven't made a great record 'cause that may sound like I'm seeking for some sort of compliment—but we're yet to make our record, you know, and I think that that will be a result of getting competitive, you know..."

Who would you get competitive with?

"Well, see, so far we're competitive with, we're history buffs, we're competitive with history. We want to make better albums than those people made. The ones on the Mt. Rushmore motherfuckers, you know. And I guess The Beatles and The Stones would probably be the exception, because they kind of wrote so much of history that you just don't compete with those people, you know. But no, like, our contemporaries would be nice. I'm really excited about the Flaming Lips record. They made, I think, the best record of the year easily, just the best record I've heard. Unfortunately, it's on four discs; you have to hear it at once from four different stereos."

How does that work?

"Everyone, you have four people or you get..."

At the same time?

"Press play at the same time. It's really cool, it's such a great record."

Not very practical.

"No it's not, but music's not, and it's cool...it's kind of like natural selection, 'cause the people that won't bother to hear it just won't get to hear it."

You do have a new album coming out in January.

"Yeah, on Caroline Records."

What is the deal there? Did you owe them another record? This was the label that the first album came out on before you signed to 550 Music.

"At the time it was kind of like cutting off a finger to get out of a trap, that's what it felt like, but that was 'cause we were in the middle of negotiations.

Now I'm really glad that they've got the album, and they're really cool to work with on it, and it's kind of nice."

It's B-sides and live cuts?

"But it's really not that many B-sides, is the thing. There might be three B-sides on the whole album. There's 16 songs on the album, the rest of them are unreleased songs. There were three songs recorded for the first album which didn't make the first album; two of which I happen to think would be your favorite songs on the first album, had they made the first album."

Really? Which ones?

"One's called 'Emeline'..."

Did you play that last night?

"Yeah, that song and a song called 'Eddie Walker.' Those were two of the best songs on the album and they got cut off."

I still love "Alice Childress."

"Yeah, well see, it kind of came down between 'Eddie Walker' and 'Alice Childress,' and we chose the female 'cause that's the way we are. And then there's a bunch of live stuff and, you know, just stuff. The thing is, we wanted to make sure it was an album that was filled with stuff that you couldn't have gotten anywhere else yet. I didn't even have copies of the stuff that got cut off the record. I don't think our management did either. I think they had it down at the record company in a vault and that was it, so we didn't think about those songs until now."

The album's called *Naked Baby Photos*.

"Yeah."

Great title. And it comes out mid-January on Caroline, so hopefully that will be readily available. And then....

"I gotta finish up my instrumental album. I'm working on an instrumental album called *Fear of Pop* and it'll be done, I guess, in the next couple of months, whenever I can get the time. It's just sounds, it's a lot of sounds, different stuff. I'll send you a tape."

