

Chasing rock stardom

Three brothers who are MENEW work to get noticed, from guerrilla marketing to U2-style publicity stunts

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How did MENEW, a relatively unknown band from a rural burg outside Cambridge, land a gig playing on The Late Show With David Letterman?

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How, for that matter, did the boys of MENEW end up jamming onstage with the biggest rock group in the world, U2?

"These things happen," shrugs Key, the aptly (nick)named pianist for MENEW.

But these things don't just happen, of course.

What Key meant was: these things happen to a band that works incessantly on its music and its image; these things happen to a band that is unabashedly self-promotional and business savvy; these things happen to a band that utilizes guerrilla marketing and publicity stunts like playing surprise concerts on a stage suspended from a giant crane in downtown Toronto.

MENEW (pronounced "menu") landed the coveted spot on Letterman a couple of weeks ago because the band has been relentlessly chasing rock stardom for the past half-dozen years.

They joined U2 onstage for a song at the Air Canada Centre in 2005 because they aggressively went after the opportunity to play alongside one of their biggest musical influences.

So when the members of MENEW nonchalantly shrug off their successes -- which they do a lot -- they're being modest, or perhaps just feigning modesty.

Their goals as a band are, and always have been, anything but modest.

"We want to top all other bands," says drummer Nathan Samuel Philip. "We want to be known and remembered as a great band."

It's a dream that the members of MENEW have shared since boyhood, growing up in the same household within roaring distance of African Lion Safari.



David Bebee, NightLife staff

Though they carefully guard their image and prefer the mystique of their stage names, the members of MENEW are actually the Klaas brothers, Aaron (a.k.a. Key), Ryan (Shade) and Nathan (Nathan Samuel Philip).

They each began piano lessons at age six, and ever since have been moving together toward the Shangri La of rock stardom. "We've always been on the same wavelength," says Nathan.

That wavelength is evidently the right one to be on, since MENEW has managed to leapfrog to notoriety and a degree of stardom by making some very unconventional career moves.

Whereas most bands spend their early years slogging it out on the local club scene, playing for free beer in front of small crowds, Menew has only played a handful of gigs in Waterloo Region in the past seven years.

They've focused their efforts mostly in Toronto, with occasional shows in New York City and other markets where a band stands a chance of getting noticed by music industry bigwigs.

And just to make sure people notice, MENEW has made a habit of staging grandiose publicity stunts. First they played on the back of a flatbed truck driving around downtown Toronto, which seemed like a very innovative idea until U2 did it in New York City.

So the boys of MENEW went back to the drawing board and dreamed up an even crazier stunt -- they played on a stage suspended from an 80-foot crane in Toronto.

"We shut down an entire road," recalls Key. "It was kind of illegal."

But the police on the scene just looked up and watched the five-song set -- along with hundreds of agog passersby -- without making any arrests afterward.

Such over-the-top showmanship surely helped MENEW catch the eye of David Letterman's talent scouts, who recruited the band to play a song on the Jan. 25 taping of the late-night chat show.

It's rare, but not unheard of, for Letterman's bookers to seek out obscure, promising bands and give them a taste of the limelight, and the boys of MENEW were more than happy to accept the invitation to the Ed Sullivan Theater in New York.

"It's so cool to play such a legendary theatre, on such a prestigious stage," says Nathan.

"The Beatles played on that stage. Bowie played that stage. Every big name has played it."

They tried not to psych themselves into thinking about the audience of roughly four million that would be watching them on TV.

If the guys were feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the gig, they certainly hid it.

They tore through a hypercharged rendition of This Isn't Real, the lead single from their recently released EP Of The Future.

"We were obviously nervous," admits Nathan, "but once we started playing we got into the zone."

Being in the zone apparently inspired Key to pounce onto his upright piano at the end of the song and stomp on the keys (the piano survived that assault, but suffered some damage when a member of Letterman's stage crew accidentally dropped it on the street later).

The performance was a big success, judging by the huge crowd that crammed into a Manhattan club to see the band play a couple of nights later.

The boys are now back in Cambridge, hunkering down in the chalet-like studio they built for themselves on their family's lot, preparing for an upcoming tour of the American West Coast.

If their momentum continues, it seems entirely likely they'll achieve the international rock stardom they've spent their lives chasing.

"That," says Nathan, "is the plan."

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