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7th Heaven: A band of workhorses They've succeeded by being willing to adapt their sound

Notes from the life of a working band: It's Sunday night. 7th Heaven is on a stage at the north end of the Taste of Lincoln Avenue festival, tossing out glow sticks, playing its cover-heavy "festival set" to an eager, beer-cup-clutching crowd.

The band members play Muse's "Uprising," a sort of nod to their past as a metal band in the style of Nine Inch Nails. "You feel like running the streets or beating people up, this is the song for you," says lead singer Keith Semple. And then, without acknowledging the musical distance covered, the band moves into the poppiest of pop songs, The Black Eyed Peas' "I Gotta Feeling."

The headlining slot at the Taste of Lincoln's Wrightwood stage is one of some 250 shows 7th Heaven will play this year, a schedule that earns the northwest suburban band more than \$500,000 per year, members say, pays the salaries of five full-time band members and 15 part-time associates and finances its own recording studio, record label and marketing campaign to push its music. Not only is there a lavishly stocked merchandise table, but an attractive young woman moves through the crowd, handing out copies of a full-color 7th Heaven promotional brochure.

This is how you keep a band going for 25 years, leader Rich Hofherr will later explain. You decide you are willing to play the covers to win the lucrative bookings. You gradually adapt the sound of your originals to match the big choruses and catchy verses of those past hits. And you never miss a marketing opportunity, whether there's an open-for-Bon-Jovi contest to be won or the fact that your Northern Ireland-raised lead singer - the third lead singer in your history - made it through to "American Idol's" Hollywood round this past season only to be knocked out by visa problems (both true).

So Sunday, while the band is performing its trademark "30 Covers in 30 Minutes" medley, a canny amalgamation of pop hits that pleases crowds and festival bookers and buys the band some space to play original tunes, too, band members get great news about one of those originals.

An associate offstage tells them their single, "Better This Way," has just been played on Chicago's WTMX- FM 101.9 "New Tunes at 9" slot again, something of a breakthrough for the band that has come close to broader success a couple of times before but never quite broken through. Out comes the banner urging the crowd to contact the radio station. "Text 'Thank you for playing 7th Heaven to 60123,'" says Semple, 28. Earlier, he had told the crowd, "Did I mention that we're opening up for Bon Jovi?" The Friday night bill at Soldier Field features the New Jersey arena-rock warhorses, Kid Rock and — opening, the result of having won the contest) — 7th Heaven. "Who's not going to think it's cool to say, 'Oh, yeah, I opened up for Bon Jovi last week at Soldier Field?'" Semple says in an interview. 'It was us, Kid Rock and Bon Jovi.' "You might sound like a (jerk), but at least, it's true." More than that, he adds, "It doesn't look bad on the resume, you know?"

Semple himself is a selling point for the band these days and a story in his own right. Singing in bands from age 14, he was a winner on the U.K.'s "Popstars: The Rivals," a show similar to "Idol," in 2002. Put into One True Voice, a sort of boy band formed from finalists on the show, he had a couple of hits in the U.K. but, unable to perform his own songs, quit as soon as he was able to get out of the contract. 7th Heaven, meanwhile — a band formed in 1985 by former schoolmates in Des Plaines — had had its most recent lead singer quit mid-decade. Hofherr searched MySpace for a replacement, looking for singers who said they sound like Def Leppard. Nothing turned up there, but the first result when he changed the search to "Bryan Adams," the Canadian pop-rock star, was Semple.

Semple answered Hofherr's e-mail with a phone call and, by late 2006, Semple was staying in Hofherr's Streamwood home, seeing if he and the band were compatible. Hofherr said he didn't even discover Semple's reality TV past until their third conversation. "I said, 'One concern we all share is can you handle being in front of 50,000 people and not freeze up?'" he recalls. "He sends a video of himself, and he's singing Queen, 'Don't Stop Me Now.' And we're like, 'OK, he's singing one of the hardest singers (to imitate) that ever lived in a stadium that's sold out.'" From Semple's perspective, he saw not only an opportunity to come to America in a good situation, but a band willing to work as hard as he has. "They play to a lot of people," he remembers thinking. "They have a similar style of music to me. And they want to try and take it to the next step. It all just seemed to fit together."

It's the first album he and the band made together, 2008's "U.S.A.-U.K.," that's getting the radio push now. The band talked to Jeff McClusky, the Chicago-based music promoter who has pushed some of rock's biggest-selling acts to radio stations, including Christina Aguilera and Oasis, trying to interest him in 7th Heaven. McClusky liked what he heard. "It comes down to a song. I thought the song 'Better This Way' had significant hit potential," he says, referring to the album's first track, co-written by Semple and Hofherr. "Getting songs by new or unknown artists played at significant radio stations is really, really tough," he says. But in addition to Chicago's WTMX, the song has been played in Milwaukee, Denver and Fort Wayne, Ind., McClusky says.

And to get people to give it a listen, it doesn't hurt to be able to say that the singer made it to the Hollywood round of this past season's "Idol," only to discover he wouldn't be able to meet in time the show's requirement of having his green card granting him full-time residency. (Semple has been in the states on a working visa, sponsored by 7th Heaven, and is currently applying for the green card.) Not being on "Idol" was a disappointment but meant Semple wouldn't have to sign his musical life away for the second time. And his bandmates convinced him they'd be able to turn the "Idol" experience into a promotional positive.

The band is proud to tell the story of the fan of theirs who turned down free Bon Jovi tickets and an overnight stay at the Swissotel Chicago because it wasn't for the night 7th Heaven was playing. WTMX marketing director Dave Karwowski explains what happened in an e-mail: "When I called to let the winner know she had won ... she passed on the prize, as she already had tickets to the Friday show and had plans to see 7th Heaven play Des Plaines Augustfest."

By the time 7th Heaven plays that Des Plaines show Saturday, rather than lamenting the move from a football stadium to a street festival, it will be hard at work on its next opportunity. Kiss, too, is apparently running a contest for bands to open for it on an upcoming tour. "We're about to go for the Kiss thing after the Bon Jovi thing," Hofherr explains. "Saturday, we go all guns blazing; we're going after that. We've got a great marketing idea."