

# Kings of Leon

## SMALL-TOWN BOYS RISE HIGH, BUT STAY GROUNDED

By Matthew Godbey

*Matthew Followill is lounging by the hotel pool in St. Augustine, Fla., enjoying a rare moment of solidarity and sun. In a few hours, his band, Kings of Leon, will perform in front of a sold-out audience at the St. Augustine Amphitheatre. During the past six months, Matthew and his bandmates—and cousins—Caleb, Jared and Nathan Followill have gone from playing clubs and theaters in the U.S. to being one of the best-selling arena acts in the country. It's a strange feat considering the Tennessee brothers and Oklahoma cousin have already conquered the world.*

When they were young, the Followill brothers had never really heard it. Rock 'n' roll of their generation didn't make its way to the Tennessee foothills when your dad was a Pentecostal evangelist preacher and your mom was usually your schoolteacher. There was no Radiohead, Metallica or Green Day. No Nirvana or Red Hot Chili Peppers. No Soundgarden or Sonic Youth. Not even Pearl Jam could be heard blaring from the family station wagon during road trips to various revivals around the deep Dixie land. Instead, Caleb, Nathan and Jared had received their early introduction to music in the ways of gospel and country—unless Mom wasn't around, in which cases Pops would sometimes let the boys listen to the Rolling Stones or Neil Young.

It was a sheltered life to say the least. The Followills spent much of their youth between Bible lessons and church cookouts, occasionally playing a few songs with some of the elders, but nothing serious. Nothing that would suggest the Followill boys would later become one of the biggest American rock bands the world has seen in decades. Nothing that would suggest they would have platinum record sales, sold-out arena tours or create a Beatles-like frenzy anytime they step out for a smoke or a walk around London—where they recently sold out the 20,000-seat O2 Arena in less than an hour.

Until this year, the Followills were leading somewhat of a double life. In the U.K. and Australia, they were, and still are, rock gods, while in their native U.S., the Kings of Leon frenzy was a little more underwhelming. That all changed with the band's latest release, "Only by the Night." Clenching the number-five spot on the Billboard charts within its first few weeks, "Only by the Night" became the band's most commercially successful album in the U.S., thanks in large part to the breakaway single "Sex on Fire."

"I guess we just needed that one song to just kinda get us out there," says Followill. "We didn't think it would be, but 'Sex on Fire' was the one."

Despite the band's staggering worldwide success, the 24-year-old guitarist still isn't used to the idea of being a "rock star" in his native land.

"There's a huge difference now," Followill explains. "We were in New Orleans yesterday and, I mean I don't care, but I was taking pictures with people, and that was just so weird to me—having people want

my picture in America. But I'm glad that it's happening here, because it just means we can stay at home more."

Home, there's something about it. Something no fancy hotel or screaming arena or five-star restaurant can compete with. Something so ingrained in the Southern man that it's impossible to leave for too long. While they may enjoy traveling the world and leading a garage-rock revival across Europe and now the U.S., home seems to be the place the Followills miss the most.

They all live within a five minutes' drive of each other around Nashville's downtown sector. Together they bought a farmhouse outside of the city where they often hang out when they're off tour. There are cookouts, campfires, college football, four-wheelers, dirt bikes, wrestling matches and, of course, the occasional bourbon buzz—all necessities of any self-respecting country boy.

"If we were always gone and then lived in London or something like that where we're kinda popular, I would just be miserable. I mean, I definitely would've gone crazy by now," laughs Followill. "But it's great; we go out to the farm and ride dirt bikes and four-wheelers and stuff, and that really helps us to stay grounded. To be able to go home and just feel like a normal person for a while really helps us a lot."

# THE PLEX TURNS FIVE

BY MATTHEW GODBEY  
SPECIAL TO THE POST AND COURIER

*Over the past five years, North Charleston's The Plex has established itself as the premier entertainment club in the state. Housing multiple clubs and hosting a wide range of events, The Plex looks to offer its wide variety of customers more than the average club experience.*

At 12:30 a.m. The Plex's weekly Friday Night Bounce is in peak form. A steady stream of clubbers are pouring into the 40,000-square-foot former movie theater as Joe Meli sits comfortably in one of the 160 tiered theater-style seats. He examines his state-of-the-art sound system, the epileptic light show and the two 20-by-30 movie screens as if he is seeing it all for the first time. Meli also scans the 1,000-plus crowd with side-to-side stares, concern spreading across his face like a lifeguard during summer storms. All four bars have been pouring heavily for hours now, and the crowd is beginning to bob and collide to the sounds of house techno and hip-hop. Like a good business owner, Meli's number-one concern is his customers.

"When we do something, we do it right," Meli says, now back in his small and modestly decorated office. "People look at this as an event. People don't come here for happy hour; they come here expecting a certain standard, and we work hard to give that to them."

After nearly 15 years in the club business, Meli and managing partner Bob Shipley know the importance of that standard. Their reputation and association with the House of Blues network has brought in some of the largest acts in the world, with the likes of Alice Cooper, Joe Cocker, Social Distortion, Tom Jones and the Black Crowes performing at The Plex's music venue Centre Stage during the last five years. Because The Plex is only open an average of 22 hours a week but hosts roughly 2,000 customers each weekend, it's all part of the venue's driving necessity to be the elite standard in Charleston entertainment.

"We're open for business for less than twenty-four hours a week, but we're here eighty hours a week to ensure that those twenty-two hours are the best they can be," says Meli.

In fact, The Plex is much more than a concert venue or dance club. A short walk through the main lobby then down a hallway and one is transported into Charleston's largest country-western club/restaurant, The Rodeo Room. Boasting Charleston's only mechanical bull and full-time country line dancing floor, it's hard to believe that just a few feet away is also Charleston's largest dance club blasting hip-hop and laser shows.

And this is just a regular Friday night. The Plex, in association with Jim Kelley Productions, Comedy Zone and Tony Kemp Productions, also offers regular comedy shows, concerts and renowned, monthly boxing events to the Lowcountry.

It is, perhaps, this dedication and variety that has afforded The Plex the opportunity to celebrate its five years in the club business. "The club scene has changed," explains Meli as he eases back in his oversized black leather chair, his bowling shirt and gold necklace and watch setting off subtle *Sopranos*

comparisons. “The diversity of our club and the hard work we put into it is what keeps us going. Since we don’t rely on just bands for our business, we are able to deliver a wider range of entertainment to our customers.”

Despite the overwhelming success of The Plex, Meli remains humble and gracious to his customers when he reflects on the club’s past five years.

“I just hope we have been a positive influence on Charleston entertainment,” says Meli. “It means a lot more to me that a show is right than if it makes a lot of money. And we don’t think we’re better than everyone else; we’re just trying to do the very best we can.”

## **Blueground Undergrass: Remembering an Era**

BY MATTHEW GODBEY

**H**aving spent the better part of a decade atop the ever-evolving bluegrass subculture, it’s safe to say that Atlanta’s Blueground Undergrass is a respected spark in the recent reigniting of bluegrass and Americana music. After all, a revival was the idea from the beginning.

When Jeff Mosier founded Blueground Undergrass in 1998, his sights were set on making bluegrass and Americana music a part of American culture again. The way he saw it, the legacy of bluegrass in American music depended on it.

Inspired by the songs and stories of immigrant farmers, loggers, miners and shiners, bluegrass became more than just a style of music, but rather a style of life in those days. It was forged from the rugged and worn backbone of America where hope and grit outweighed the hardships of some of our nation’s darkest days. For generations, bluegrass served as the historical journal from one of America’s most defining eras, and it was that cultural landmark that Mosier sought to preserve. Mosier wanted to create a sound that remained true to the origins of Americana but modern enough to attract a new generation of potential bluegrass believers.

With each album and tour came larger crowds, bigger venues and tours that began stretching from coast to coast, as Blueground Undergrass’s engaging new take on bluegrass started to take flight. The music that had once stood as a testament to a people, a period in time and a way of life was now beginning to resurrect itself in the hearts and souls of people far removed from the Appalachian porches of its past.

A band made up of historians as much as musicians, Blueground Undergrass has managed to keep its feet on its roots while reaching upward like a conduit of musical history for a new generation. Along with Blueground Undergrass, the Americana revival has given its followers not only the chance to discover new music, but also the chance to discover a history that was once lost altogether.