



BLUE OCTOBER

Interview by James Gaden. Photo by Chris Barber.

Although only known to a select few in the UK, Blue October have enjoyed a long career which has seen the Alternative Rock group achieve platinum-selling success in their homeland of America. Vocalist Justin Furstenfeld formed the band with his brother Jeremy in 1995 and while the singer has struggled with depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts throughout his life, he found salvation in his music. Fireworks talked to Justin about the band's ninth studio album 'I Hope You're Happy'.

The new album has a unique sound. Where do your songwriting influences come from?

I'd have to say I like Peter Gabriel, The Smiths, The Cure, things like that, but I like a lot of old Jazz like Dave Brubeck and Ella Fitzgerald, plus I enjoy the art of Urban music where you basically just have a beat and a hook. So I take elements like that and just pile it all together. I don't understand why people don't mesh genres together more these days. Everyone seems to define themselves as Rock or Rap or Alternative. I want to know why you can't just mesh the beautiful parts of each with each other?

You often draw on your experiences with depression and anxiety, so what is your process when writing music for Blue October?

It's different, sometimes I'll write music and then write lyrics to fit it. Sometimes I'll start with a melody in my head. If I'm walking down the street sometimes I can come up with a fully formed song in my head, I've always been able to do that. I also like to be inspired by other people's lives. A lot of my songs were written about me and things I was going through, but I'm listening more to others these days, to write about their experiences. Sometimes I'll sit and basically interview them as if I were doing a piece on them, just as you are with me now, then just write as much as I possibly can and as honestly as I can.

For this album it was fun because what I did was take little pieces of music and chop them up and use my MPC drum machine to create a track I could give to the rest of the band to play over. We wouldn't necessarily all be in a room together and rock out like we've done in the past, these songs were done more rhythmically. Instead of Jeremy setting up his full kit, I'd have him just play the kick drum until I had the microphones placed right and the sound I wanted, then he'd come back and play the snare pattern. We pieced the tracks together like building blocks.

I was reading your bio and it said you ended up touring and playing over three

hundred shows before a label signed you?

Yeah, that's right and that was an eye opening experience! (laughs) We were playing at a seafood restaurant in Houston, Texas and I was really upset about it because I didn't want to play for people while they were eating their shrimp. I thought my art was way too deep for that! (laughs) These days, I'll play for anyone, I'll play in a grocery store, I don't care. But this guy was out there and he said "Next week I'll fly you to New York" and I thought "Whatever" but he was former Kid Rock manager Michael Rand, then he got us signed to a label and the rest is history. This was back in 1999, the band was formed in 1995. So it was back when you could sell a million records, put out vinyl and CDs and people could buy them from stores, labels gave you tour support... so we got signed by Universal, then dropped by Universal, then re-signed to Universal, now we run our own label and do it independently.

So Universal signed you in 1999, then dropped you a year later, and in 2002 you played a showcase and Universal signed you again in 2003. Is that right?

Yeah! You have to think of the music business like this, instead of being a jaded artist complaining about how you got dropped, think about being like a shoe company, if you make a shoe that doesn't fit people's feet, then you can't sell it, right? So you need to man up, realise that music is a business, people are investing a lot of money in you and if you aren't selling records, they will let you go. When they dropped me I didn't think "Oh my God, I'm broken". I thought, "Okay, how do I get back? I'll have to make music that people will like better". So I tried my hardest to write music that fulfilled me but would also be the most universally themed music I could. As a result, the people that dropped me heard the new stuff and re-signed me, which is great. I only sold them 15,000 units last time. I want to sell 1,000,000 units. And I knew the team, I

thought they were good people, I just made the wrong kind of record.

This approach clearly worked, because 'Foiled' in 2006 was huge, you had hits, you were on Jay Leno and Jimmy Kimmel's shows, the album did sell over a million in the US and you opened for The Rolling Stones!

We all wanted to win. It's like a marriage, if you have a period where it's not going so well you might take a break, but then you realise how much you love each other and both go the extra mile and work extra hard to make it work.

So why are you independent now, instead of still with a major label?

The reason we started our own label was because people don't buy records like they used to, the label has to figure out ways to make more money, so they take 20% of your publishing, 20% of your merchandise, 20% of your touring, and then they take 85% of your album. I said no, because we've been touring for so long most of our money comes from the road and I wasn't prepared to give up that cut. So we parted ways but it was amicable and respectful, I still talk to the people at Universal all the time. It's taken a while to grow our label and now we're close to being able to compete, but it was tough. We are the underdog, but I love being the underdog.

You also have a documentary coming out?

Yes, it's almost done, we've been working on it for six years but every time I want to wrap it up something beautiful happens like I have another child or we open another door in our lives, things just get better and better and better. We really want to wrap the documentary perfectly, we've got an hour and a half done, we're just working on putting a suitable ending to it. I'm super proud of it because it's not just about "how cool Blue October is!" It's a serious documentary about how serious the disease of addiction is and how beautiful second chances, positivity and surrounding yourself with love is.