

Kutless

Believer | February 28, 2012

A funny thing happened on the way to the release of “Believer”, the latest album by Kutless. Somehow, without the band even realizing it, through more than a decade of making music, they became... established.

Just like that, Kutless has transformed from that new rock band from Oregon to the one new bands look up to, the band whose music is all over the radio in multiple formats, the band that’s sold millions of records.

“We’re not the new band anymore,” says front man Jon Micah Sumrall in a moment of reflection before a show. “Now, people look to us as the veteran. It’s kinda weird. We meet kids who say, ‘I grew up listening to your music’, but they’re like 25 years old!”

“Believer” finds Kutless using that decade of growth to deliver an expertly crafted set of songs with as much diversity in the music as there is consistency in the message. Pounding drums and screaming guitars lead the way out of the gate as “If It Ends Today” makes the album’s first statement on what it really means to have a relationship with Christ. And a gentle piano points us heavenward as “Carry Me to the Cross” closes in reverent worship. In between, Kutless explores the brutality of the crucifixion, our resulting identity in Christ, and the daily struggle to surrender to His leading.

It only takes one listen to realize that Kutless has really come of age musically. They’ve determined their style instead of chasing the latest trend, and it shows. As Sumrall put it, “Instead of trying to sound like the music we liked and listened to, I feel like we’ve started to make music that we’re good at, naturally. The new record begins to showcase our lineup, our creative process.”

A critical part of that sound is Sumrall’s vocals, and they certainly stand out on “Believer.” Producer Dave Lubben was a vocal performance major in college, and he focused on pushing Sumrall vocally during the making of this record. The result is massive range, not only in octaves but in delivery, from grit where it’s needed to soaring anthemic choruses that convey a wealth of emotion. Simply put, this is the best Sumrall has ever sung.

Steadily building momentum has brought the band legions of new fans in the last few years, and many of them might not know the fascinating story of the origin of Kutless. It’s a strange mix of basement jam sessions, mall skate shops, and a monumental WWJD bracelet.

Sumrall had no plans to lead a rock band. Music was a hobby, a distant second to his first love: sports. He went to college in Oregon on a full-ride soccer scholarship, and it was in his dorm

room that Kutless was born. “I came early for training for soccer,” he recalls. “A few weeks later, when everybody else was moving into the dorms, I was just playing my guitar in my room. A couple of guys came in and started hanging out, and the next thing I knew, I had like 10 guys crammed in. It was an impromptu worship service in a dorm room. The RA stopped in, and he said he’d wanted to do a Thursday night worship time, and asked if I’d be cool with leading it. I did, and that group of guys was, for the most part, the original members of the band that would become Kutless.”

Later, as the band got a little more serious, they wound up moving into a house on campus with a basement where they could practice. Guitarist James Mead joined up, and God orchestrated a remarkable “discovery story”. James had a summer job at Zumiez, the skate shop at the mall. One day, a guy noticed his WWJD bracelet. The pair started chatting about church, James mentioned his band, and the guy mentioned his identity: Seth Ebel, A&R man for his brother Brandon’s record labels, Tooth & Nail and BEC recordings. Seth liked the description of the band’s sound and agreed to hear them play. The date was set: September 11, 2001.

Given the tragic events of that day, this was no typical introduction. “Ultimately,” Sumrall says, “Seth came anyway. We said, ‘Can we just do a few worship songs. Get this load off our chest.’ We just worshiped together. That was the start of our audition for our label.” A mere 13 days later, a contract was on the table, and Kutless was on the way to a stellar career.

“Believer” is poised to become a highlight of this remarkable body of work. The name itself is particularly important. On this album, believers will find a deeply relevant message: what does it really mean to surrender to Christ? How does this relationship change you, every day? How does it define you? It is only now, after all these years, that Kutless is able to explore these vital issues. Sumrall declares, “We’ve made a huge leap in the quality of the songwriting. It’s diverse – there are things I love on the upbeat side (heavier rocking moments), and things I love about the intimate worshipful moments. I really feel like this newest record shows a real maturity from over the years of what we’ve learned, what we’ve brought together.”

If this took a decade, it was well worth the wait.

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