

BETTER THAN EZRA

Before their omnipresent 1995 single “Good” hit No. 1, before their debut album *Deluxe* went double-platinum, before popular shows such as *Desperate Housewives* licensed their song “Juicy,” before Taylor Swift attested to their timeless appeal by covering their track “Breathless” — New Orleans’ Better Than Ezra was a pop-rock act paying its dues, traveling from town to town in a ramshackle van. Over two decades after the band formed, that vigilance still resonates strongly with the trio, who were finally rewarded after seven years of stubbornly chasing their dreams. “This band,” notes bassist Tom Drummond, “has never been handed anything.”

“I remember when we drove to St. Louis just for \$50 and pizza,” says frontman-songwriter Kevin Griffin. “Then in the middle of the show, we’d start to drop the hint: ‘Hey! Anybody got a place for us to crash?’” Though they were told countless times by managers and A&R reps to throw in the towel, “Good” — a joyous anthem about pulling the plug on a relationship — silenced skeptics.

Better Than Ezra has always possessed an uncanny ability to deliver a sticky melody. It just took time for the world to figure this out. As testament to Griffin’s pop prowess, he’s now become an in-demand songwriter and producer across an array of genres (from Sugarland’s “Stuck Like Glue” to Howie Day’s “Collide”) in the five years since the band’s last album, *Paper Empire*. While penning tracks for other artists, Griffin found himself squirreling away compositions he felt best belonged to the Better Than Ezra canon. He coaxed the band back together (which includes drummer Michael Jerome) to record in L.A. for six weeks with Beck and Phoenix producer Tony Hoffer. As testament to their inner-band harmony, ex-drummer Travis McNabb, still tight with the band, filled in on percussion in the studio while Jerome was on tour.

When talking about breaking out of the 90s bubble, Drummond says, “We’ve been asked to join nostalgia tours. But we always say ‘no,’ because the music we’re making is still relevant. We don’t feel like we have to make the same albums we did in the ’90s. Our music changes.”

Proving just that point, the group recently dropped an effulgent new single, “Crazy Lucky,” in advance of their eighth full length, *All Together Now* (out September 9, 2014). The single is currently in the Top 40 Hot AC Charts and continuing to climb.

All Together Now, a collection of crisp, electro-pop inspired songs. Themed around chance, the album spins out from the serendipity-marveling “Crazy Lucky” into reflective, if relatable, fare such as the vibratory, folk-inflected “Insane,” the falsetto-kissed “One Heart Beating,” and the more sprawling “The Great Unknown.” Griffin reflects fondly on Better Than Ezra’s fateful formation and lasting appeal: “I’m more and more fascinated by how so many things we consider bedrock in our lives — certainties, immutable things, everything we love and cherish — are in fact held

together by these invisible, gossamer strings.”

And they don't take their good fortune for granted. Though the group recorded 18 tracks, they only deemed 11 of those worthy enough for *All Together Now*. “We made an album that was poppier and more concise songwriting,” Griffin says. “We wanted to give our old fans something familiar, but we wanted to attract new fans. There's going to be a nostalgic element to our band now, but how can we transcend that?” The philosophy driving their compositions, says Griffin, is pretty simple: “Whether realistic or folly, we still believe there's some plateau of success we haven't reached, that's within our grasp.”

Despite having written solo for so long, Griffin's recent success as a musical hired gun has inspired him to change his ways. This time around, most of the album was co-written with his extracurricular friends. Nolan Sipe lent his sound to “Crazy Lucky,” while Tony Hoffer lent orchestration and a gently echoing beat to “Gonna Get Better” — a wake-up call about a friend's addiction. (Of the latter's optimistic tone, Griffin notes: “There's a great saying I love: It came to pass, it didn't come to stay. When you're in a hole, you can't see that sometimes....”) Says Drummond, “For us, it's always been, ‘Is it a good melody you can sing with meaningful lyrics?’” On the opposite end of the spectrum, there's “Dollar \$ign,” a jaunty sing-along about materialism with carnivalesque synths — Griffin's joyous, satirical collaboration with Shy Carter and Zac Malloy.

Part of this sonic switch-up can also be attributed to adding Hoffer to the mix. “He likes to use guitars, but he also likes to use synthesizers in a tasteful way,” says Drummond. “We really wanted the best of both worlds. But it still feels like a band played it. Most of it is live, three of use playing in the same room at once.”

Letting go of control was a work in progress, admits Griffin, who adds, “Left to our own devices, everything would sound like something we've done before.” By Griffin's estimation, it took him 10 days to stop second-guessing Hoffer's direction. He laughs when thinking about his initial anxiety. “In the perfect collaboration each person is a foil and sounding board to the other. When it's a true collaboration, you really listen to that person,” he says. “There's a respect for what they do. That's the way the songwriting went for this record, and we just hit our stride.” The ethos underlying *All Together Now*? “Rebirth,” says Drummond.

Griffin has a theory as to why resilience is wired into his band's DNA. “We've always just been able to communicate,” he says, adding, “and Better Than Ezra is bigger than just a band now.” He's not exaggerating: With the Better Than Ezra Foundation (www.BTEFoundation.org), the band give back to their native New Orleans with charity ventures to benefit everything from coastal restoration to after school programs for underprivileged kids. www.BTEFoundation.org

“The band has become a way of life for us,” Griffin says. “There's more to us than meets the eye. All of that plays into us getting along and keeping this thing going.

But it's more than just guys getting together and playing. People have come to depend on the band."