

GETTING TO KNOW

THE HEAD AND THE HEART

BY LAURA STUDARUS

The Head and the Heart believe in kismet. Well...maybe. While enduring the particularly dry central Texas heat, lead vocalist/guitarists Jonathan Russell and Josiah Johnson are trying to decide if they should credit their band's formation to the hand of fate, or just good timing.

Having moved from Virginia to Seattle to pursue a solo career in 2009, Russell wasn't looking to form a band until he met Johnson at an open mic night. "I went to that open mic instead of dozens of other open mics. There could have been several different paths chosen that would have made it harder to find this very natural progression with Josiah," Russell muses. "It was like meeting that perfect girl—there's no way it's this amazing. It was almost like we would finish each other's sentences musically."

Johnson playfully demurs. "Instead of calling it fate, it's like the moment you stop going. 'Man, I really wish I could find a girlfriend!' You just start doing your own thing, and that person shows up."

The open mic night quickly turned into a hub, and Johnson and Russell adopted the other members of the band—Charity Rose Thielen (violin), Chris Zasche (bass), Kenny Hensley (piano) and Tyler Williams (drums)—into the fold over the course of several months. "We just kept doing what we were doing and weren't in a rush. So when the right people were added months later, it was because they were the perfect fit," explains Russell.

Experiencing the Seattle scene as transplants, a sense of nostalgia for a place left behind hangs heavy over The Head and the Heart's self-titled debut. It's an emotion both Russell and Johnson assure is very much an extension of their lives. "As long as you don't say things like, 'I live at 1986 Hillman Drive West/And I like to go to the Whole Foods Market' in your lyrics, there are common things that everyone experiences," says Johnson. "I've never tried to write a song about someone else. I'm not that creative."

"The way that you're able to articulate it, the way that you do and still use yourself in it somehow makes it more universal," Russell agrees. "When I feel like I'm not doing anything for the world because I'm just driving around and playing music, sometimes I remember that. We get things rolling. Ideas pop up."

The sextet's alt-folk tunes have proved their universal appeal—just outside a year of forming, the band experienced an upgrade from hometown heroes to recent Sub Pop signees. While Johnson and Russell may be game to try believing in fate, they're struggling to take in recent events. "I don't know if you call it 'expectations satisfied' so much as 'mind continually being blown,'" says Johnson of their string of successes. "You love Vampire Weekend and you're not in a band, then you form a band and eight months later you're opening for them. What the hell? How did this happen?"

"It really messes with your perception of the universe," says Russell with a nod. "What's real, what actually has weight to it and what doesn't?"

While the band is excited at the thought of no longer living on ramen noodles, success is not without drawbacks—not that they're going to let their newfound notoriety stop them from visiting open mic night. "It's definitely like a transition into manhood," Russell says of their shift into the big



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leagues and increased artistic expectations. "Your voice is changing, you're going to get frustrated, but you have to go. Yeah, this shit's going to change a little bit. I'm signed to a label now. I don't have no one judging me on my songs anymore. It's sink or swim."

However, new experiences have opened The Head and the Heart to new emotions—which both songwriters can't help but see as potential for new material. "I'm curious to see how the next record sounds because I feel like now we've made a new puzzle," says Russell. "I'm just as curious as anyone at our show. What's the next album going to sound like? I don't know!" For the time being, Russell and Johnson are happy to let their next round of inspiration come to them—in whatever direction the winds of fate may blow. **F**