

## Taking the Stage

by Lauren Biron

AT MIDNIGHT, armed with a ruler and a pencil, Bentley Chang kneels in his bedroom under a poster of John Lennon. Next to a large, black bass drum that dominates the floor, he lays out a thick sheet of drawing paper and begins to sketch the letter “zhe” of the Cyrillic alphabet; it looks like a K reflected along its vertical axis. In the muggy, musky room, his skin sticks to his wifebeater and basketball shorts as he outlines his design. Once finished, he cuts out the stencil with a razor and attaches the altered K to the drum with masking tape.

He thought of using the letter “zhe” as a “K” when he was driving down the freeway. It came to him as randomly as the band name had come to their DJ, Kevin Agorrilla. The group had suggested names for weeks at a time: Circles with Dots, Smegmatron, Audial Entropy, Forte. Then one day at practice, Kevin suggested Kersey, named after the masculine Charles Bronson character from Death Wish 3. Only four of the six band members had seen the movie, but all agreed that Charles Bronson was so badass he could kill Chuck Norris in a fight, and that was good enough. The name provided no stigma, no definition of what they should sound like. The rhythm and funk and punk could take over. When Bentley accidentally misspelled the band name, Kearsy was born.

Now, as the music of Circa Survive plays, Bentley mixes red and crimson acrylic paint and retrieves a flat brush. Carefully, he applies the stencil, nearly two feet in length. He freehand paints miniature swirls of color coming off of one side of the zhe, so that they look like red solar flares. It is nearly five in the morning; he leaves the paint to dry while he sleeps. In just over twelve hours, Kearsy and their freshly painted drum will be the fifth of six contestants at the Battle of the Bands. Even aspiring rock stars need their rest.

Scattered throughout classrooms at the University of California, Irvine, the men of Kearsy uniformly ignore their professors. David Ismet Lenger, the bassist, sits through his History of Rock class, wondering when he’ll see Kearsy’s name in such a textbook. Bentley imagines possible scenarios: if someone’s instrument fails, like at their first show, he’ll tell a joke about promiscuous nuns. He runs through the set list once, twice, a hundred times. After class he returns home to pick up the drum and get ready for the show, but he has run out of strong gel. He scours everywhere for some, but ends up buying a small tube for \$25. Then he spends over three hours spiking his mohawk.

Meanwhile Sean Halpin cleans his house and gets his roommate Jeff to shave his head into a mohawk of his own. Kevin leaves his Social Science research methods class with an empty head and an empty stomach. He heads home, makes a sandwich, dons his hoodie with bright green and red dinosaurs, and leaves for the meeting spot at UCI.

Kevin arrives first and drinks a couple of beers. Soon the other five members of the band and their guest saxophone player meet him atop the concrete parking structure, where just a year before they began practicing their songs. The acoustics were terrible, there was

nowhere to plug in amps, and one night the police threatened them with a \$2,000 fine if they were caught making a disturbance again. After that they started renting a studio practice room.

With the group gathered, Bentley unveils Wesley Hayashi's newly painted drum.

Oh shit, that's tight! How long did that take? How did you do it?

Done ogling, they huddle together for last pieces of advice. David Salvador, one of the two guitarists, glances at the others.

Let's remember to play slow.

The others agree. Check the levels. Stay together. Have fun.

Then they pack two guitars (an American Fender Stratocaster and a Telecaster), a Japanese-made Jaguar Fender bass, a Vestax PDX-2000 turntable setup, a five piece Pearl drum kit, amps, pedals, a saxophone, and seven people into as few cars as possible, and drive to UCI's Phoenix Grille. There, on a grassy lawn shadowed by Aldrich Park's tall trees, a black stage waits for them.

The seven musicians unload their equipment in a holding area behind the stage, ready for easy access later. They will perform second to last, so they try to fill the time until the show. Sean stretches like he does before every gig, though he never drops into the splits he learned during martial arts training. Kevin goes to the bathroom about six times. Ismet tries to keep his hands warm as he listens to the other bands, relishing how different Kearsy will sound.

They will gladly tell those who ask that their sound is unique. They're a mix of experimental, indie, and funk, with some jazz, hip-hop, rap, and blues thrown in. Influences include bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Placebo, The Mars Volta, Pearl Jam, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Jamiroquai, Circa Survive, and Brotha Lynch Hung. Each member of the band brings in his own unique musical taste. Ismet is drawn to funky bass lines, and once tried (unsuccessfully) to convince the rest of the band to cover songs found on the anime and video game soundtracks he adores. Sean adheres to the sounds of Buddy Guy, Jimi Hendrix, and other blues tunes, fitting for a lead guitarist. Kevin credits DJ Qbert and A Tribe Called Quest as his main inspirations, for getting him excited about "scratching" in the first place. Bentley, the vocalist, finds a soft spot for the MC's of Wu Tang Clan, Gorillaz, and John Lennon (since promoting peace and love through an artistic medium is probably the best thing an artist can do). But the one band you are sure to find on every one of the guys' playlists is Incubus. They've got unique beats, good lyrics, and their very own personal DJ – just like Kearsy.

However, Kearsy still has four bands to watch before a year of practice and waiting can finally emerge. The first band, Paper Thin Walls, takes the stage as the setting sun casts long shadows of trees over a still crowd of 30 people, seven of them the judges from

UCI's student body. Bentley's tall spikes of hair are visible as he stands amongst the mass. Then comes the second band, Kids Like You, featuring vocals both higher and lower than Bentley's will fluctuate. The crowd starts to sway as the band dances on stage. Quick drums and pop-based tunes continue with The Jakes. The six-man band has already won an Orange County Music Award, been a contender on MTV2's "On the Rise," and is a few weeks away from releasing a full-length album - as well as playing at the renowned Troubadour, where Neil Diamond and Guns N' Roses were discovered.

While the fourth act, Andrew Heringer (with a full-length CD of his own), plays slow acoustic guitar comparable to Jason Mraz, the members of Kearsy set up their gear on the right-hand stage. In the center, Wesley positions his three Zildjian cymbals, the hi-hat (a double set of cymbals, which can be bashed against one another by means of a foot pedal, or drummed upon), a snare drum, two toms, and the beloved, black, zhe-emblazoned bass drum. To his left, Kevin connects his turntable setup and organizes his records. In front of Kevin, Ismet adjusts the pedals and checks the connection to his black- and-white bass. Davey and Sean do the same for their guitars, and Brian vibrates his saxophone reed. Perfect - everything has to be perfect.

The winners will play at UCI's Wayzgoose Festival, a yearly binge of food and performances that thousands attend. More importantly for Kearsy, the top band also earns a gig at the Roxy - a nightclub on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood. Opened in 1973 at a former strip club, the Roxy has hosted Bruce Springsteen, Alice Cooper, John Lennon, Tori Amos, Nirvana, Foo Fighters, and Guns N' Roses. It is also where Incubus performed their first "Pay to Play" show that launched them towards stardom.

Maybe that is why twenty-one bands auditioned for this year's Battle of the Bands. Just days before the competition itself, judges selected six bands based on acoustic performances. Because of the acoustic constraints, only Bentley, Sean, and Davey performed. No drums, no bass, no Kevin scratching. But they made it. The judges also listened to their demo tape, a four-song compilation that featured all of the members. It was a far cry from the tape they submitted for Battle of the Bands 2006, a rough version of "Don't Fear the Familiar" that had only one verse and a chorus. That time, Sean turned in a recording made after only three weeks together as a group. Luckily, the Battle of the Bands rejected them; it saved them some embarrassment. But now they stand ready after spending the last year preparing for this moment.

Heringer finishes, and the lights dim on the left stage. Sean slides his guitar over his Guns N' Roses shirt and takes his place at center stage, his back to the audience. He raises his arm high above his head, then plunges his hand across the strings. He strikes the first chord of "Don't Fear." Kevin plays what sounds like quick, metallic breaths on the turntable. Wes beats twice on the bass drum, and Sean's hand arcs down again.

At the edge of the stage, their six girlfriends take photographs and video while emitting high-pitched squeals. Behind them, five solid rows of people surround the judges' table. The crowd has swelled to over 120 people, students sprawling along the lawn or peering from the balconies of nearby buildings. The fifty closest to the stage, many (but not all)

of them friends of at least one band member, begin clapping and yelling sharp wooot!'s of support. As he plays, Sean watches the crowd fade from his sight – he can think of nothing but music.

“Don’t Fear the Familiar” was a song written for Kearsy back when they were still jumping between names. Bentley started writing it as a semi-autobiographical song, singing, Now this little boy is shooting rivals when he’s bored, blowing cash on corner whores. Now it’s just too late because he doesn’t give a fuck about you or what you have to say, because he wanted to fit in; all he needed was a chance. And the thugs of Graceland Ave. were the ones to lend the helping hand.

Shortly after meeting for the first time, Sean and Bentley wound up at a Red Onion restaurant. There, Bentley confessed that at thirteen he had joined one of many Asian gangs in Monterey Park. He regularly found himself in street fist fights or carrying a gun. He watched people die.

But at the same time, he was also drawn to a radically different life. To fill an empty fifth period his freshman year of high school, he joined the choir and received his first real vocal training. Until then, vocal practice consisted of singing Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey songs in the car with his mother and two sisters. The school choir traveled to competitions in New York, Hawaii, and Boston, placing consistently. And then came his crowning achievement: Bentley sang in the California State High School Honor Choir, an annual choir organized by the Southern California Vocal Association, which was composed of the state's 200 best singers. He also began playing guitar and providing vocals for his first band, The Rid. Through music, he found encouragement and acceptance that he couldn’t get from behind the barrel of a gun.

When one of his best friends was killed, Bentley explained to Sean, he followed his passion for music and put the gangster lifestyle behind him. “Don’t Fear the Familiar” became a call to everyone, a proclamation that nobody should be afraid, or ashamed of their character. After hearing this, Sean, already well aware of Bentley’s ability to sing, immediately wanted to ask Bentley to join the growing band. But Sean hesitated; he knew from personal experience with his Shorin Do Kempo guru that it is “different” to be in a room with someone who has ended another person’s life. He leaned in towards Bentley and asked a simple question.

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“No, man,” he laughed.

Bentley came to the band’s next practice.

As “Don’t Fear” comes to an end, Bentley takes a bow, swings the microphone up by the cord, and catches it.

“What’s up everybody?” he shouts, before asking the sound technicians to turn up the volume on his microphone.

“Take off your shirts!” screams a deep-voiced girl from the center of the crowd. Bentley gives her an awkward smile, keeps his shirt on, and continues.

“...This next song’s called ‘A Lesson Learned.’”

He begins bobbing to the new beat, doubling over and clutching the microphone. Bentley sings over a slower rock tune, laced with blues.

Took her out to dinner and we had a couple drinks. Told her that I loved her, and she said it too, I think.

As the song - already speeding along quicker than it should - further increases in tempo, the tightly packed crowd of college students swing their heads in time with the faster beat of Wes’ drums. Sean and Bentley rage around the stage, head banging with abandon. At one point Bentley’s six-inch spikes nearly decapitate Sean, who narrowly misses smacking him in the face with his guitar. Sean scoots forward, hopping on one foot towards the audience, looking as if he wants to leap off of the stage and surf atop the people in front of him. He manipulates the very air that people breathe, deciding which sound waves to send; the thudding rhythm of the bass and drums bursts from the amplifiers and vibrates inside everyone's chests.

Kearsey, in its earliest form, was actually just Wes and Sean. Within five minutes of meeting one another, they had established the musical bond and decided to jam. The Bairds was born. Wes had been Japanese Taiko drumming since he was nine years old, and picked up the snare drum when he reached high school. He added the rest of the drum kit piece by piece, isolating each of them mentally, building up speed and emulating his major drum influence, Buddy Rich. When Sean went to L.A. on weekends to meet his martial arts instructor, he spent the night at Wes’s house, which was just a block away. There, they would jam, playing mad mixes of guitar riffs and drum solos.

The group grew quickly. They added Ismet, who picked up the bass out of sheer boredom the summer before his sophomore year of college, and then realized that he’d been following the bass line of his favorite songs all along without ever knowing it. Davey, who had randomly picked up guitar during high school and only taken a couple months of lessons, also joined, along with his high school friend, Kevin.

Kevin, who the other members claim resembles Peter Pan, still uses scratching techniques that he first learned in third grade when, one Wednesday after school, he was locked out of his house. He wandered over to see his next-door neighbor Ron - a friend of the family, a senior in high school, and a member of a DJ crew. Kevin followed him upstairs, where a DJ setup balanced on small nightstands and bookshelves. Ron sat Kevin on an ottoman and taught him the basics of beat and rhythm matching. From then on, when he wasn’t skating or playing with friends, he went to Ron’s to watch him and

his friends practice their mixes and scratches. His sophomore year of high school he got his first DJ set and a DJ video, and taught himself to scratch through imitation. When Sean said there was a place for him in Kearsy, he upgraded his equipment, spent more time scratching and mixing, and nestled quickly into the band.

Bentley was the last part of the ensemble. Sean introduced him to the other members over a game of football. Notably, it culminated with Ismet accidentally kneeling Bentley in the kidney. Nevertheless, the group bonded – Kearsy was complete.

Oh, but you taught me hard that love is just a game, and we're just figurines on the board, waiting to get played. It's just a goddamned shame, such a goddamned shame. Bentley screams, and the crowd screams back. Sean draws out a series of quick notes, shaking his butt towards the crowd as Davey and Ismet laugh, egging him on.

The two, still grinning, start off the third song, "Gotham, CA," a funky tune Ismet wrote after watching Batman shows on television. It changes from 3/4 time to 16/4 time to 4/4 time – making it challenging to synchronize with the other instruments, and something bassists rarely do, since most musicians work with only one or two time signatures within a song. Sean raises his hands over his head and begins to clap in time with Wes's beat. The crowd mirrors him, dozens of hands reaching towards the sky in unison. As Bentley starts to rap, Kevin begins scratching a section of the record. Woh, woh, woh w w w woh, word up, woh woh woh, word, word, word uh uh up.

Bentley looks like a break-dancer as he moves back and forth across the stage. He jams one long, skinny leg on top of a black speaker and, with a raw voice, screams the lyrics so loud that his throat would ache were it not dulled with a gulp or two of whiskey – and the audience can still barely hear him over the sound of the lead guitar.

Sean plays with fervor, using skills initially cultivated to win the heart of an eighth-grade girl who loved musicians. He got his first guitar the summer before his freshman year, and before the end of high school he was playing for three hours a day. He even won the young lady's affection – a groupie from the very beginning, perhaps. Sean's father taught him scales, jazz chords, and blues progressions, and he soon started writing songs alone, in rooms filled with acrid smoke. With his grandfather, a traveling blues guitarist at the age of 14, his father, also a blues guitarist by the time he was 15, and his brother, a regular guitar hero in his eyes, it seems evident that the guitar runs in Sean's blood. And now that very blood splatters across the white pickboard of his Fender Strat, as he launches into a high-pitched riff and slices his right index finger on one of the strings.

Sean cut himself for the first time the same guitar, during what they consider their first official show. On January 7, 2007, the band played to a full room in the small venue of Hogue Barmichael's, where fat, red pipes line the ceiling, and beer stickers and surfboards line the walls. The bar is in a small complex on the outskirts of Irvine, where white buildings with maroon awnings advertise dentistry, airport travel planners, and a classical dance studio for suburbanites. In order to play the show, the band sold their own tickets to their first real gig under the bright green lights. Their set lasted longer

there as well, giving them time to play additional songs like their much beloved “L.O.C.O.H.A” (“Lines of Coke off Hookers’ Asses”) and “Slow Down.”

Technically, they had played a show before the one at Hogue’s. At the Beall Center at UCI, they were part of an entourage that welcomed a new exhibit. Their venue was changed at the last minute, so they played in a small amphitheatre outside of the center rather than indoors as planned. They used their own amps, were unable to do a sound check until minutes before stepping up to play, their levels were off, and Sean broke a string and had to play on his backup guitar. On a positive note, he didn’t slice his finger open. And the band got to do a warm-up show, so that people new to performing, like Ismet and Davey, could work the nerves out of their systems.

But at the Battle of the Bands there are no nerves. Just boundless reserves of energy as the guys play on. After this night, they’ll consider any show a success if Sean doesn’t bleed all over the place. But, caught in the moment, Sean simply sucks the open cut to siphon off the blood, takes a firmer hold of his pick, and slams on with the song, bouncing around the stage with Bentley. Wes makes the drums swell, and they play faster and faster, building to a crescendo until, with a final crash, the cymbals end it.

“What’s up UCI? We are Kearsey,” Bentley shouts to the crowd as Sean whips a blue handkerchief out of his pocket and staunches the blood. “We got one more song for you all. Thanks for coming out. This song’s called ‘Drowning.’”

Oh, Messiah, do you see me drowning in this sea of sweat and tears? Becoming everything I’ve feared; do you understand me? Can you hear me now? Does it amuse you? He sings, a catchy guitar rhythm of quick picking underlies it and builds into a bridge, then drops off into the first drum solo of the night. The other members of the band bow their heads toward the drum kit, directing all focus towards Wes, their go-to man. Don’t know what to do with a song? Make Wes play something. Need to put two different-sounding parts together? Let Wes bridge it. Members of the band cite him as half of the talent therein, and rightly call him their Drum God.

No one would ever guess now - with his blonde-tipped spikes quivering as he smashes cymbals, toms, snare, and bass in rhythmic ecstasy - that Wes is partially deaf as a result of drumming, and at times cannot hear the lowest notes. He plays flawlessly, an animalistic game of patty cake with the circles of plastic arrayed around him. The rest of the band jumps back in to the quick rock tune, which sounds almost like it could be Metallica; the rhythm is so fast that the fingers on the guitars can barely keep up. Sean jumps around until his strap slips and the Strat nearly falls off. With that, the guitars, bass, turntable, and drums all stop together, leaving Bentley’s voice echoing in the silence, until a thunder of screams, applause, and cries of encore obscures it.

Sean raises his guitar and shouts, “We’ve got a bleeder!” As he floats back to Earth, he looks out and sees the largest crowd he has ever played to, hundreds of eyes locked on him. In that second, Sean thinks he knows what Heaven feels like.

Sean pulls Wes into a hug as the stage lights on the right dim and the winner of the 2006 Battle of the Bands, Links, hops onto the stage. The crowd migrates over to hear the songs from their album, a mere week away from release. Singer Robbie Arnett thrusts a megaphone up the microphone, distorting his voice and playing music simultaneously. Guitarist Eric Frank gallops around the stage and bounds over to where Kearsy just performed. During the grand finale, the three members of the band surround their drummer, team drumming the same rhythm on their own snares and tossing drumsticks back and forth to one another.

Meanwhile, Kearsy gathers off to the side. Surrounded by a circle of friends, girlfriends, well-wishers and onlookers, they wait and consider their performance. They had energy, God yes. The crowd was involved - but they played their 20-minute set in 15 minutes. There had been a few mistakes because of the speed. But how could they control the fervor that had built up for a year? They exploded off the stage and it had never felt better.

The seven judges convene, rating each band out of 30 possible points: 10 each for stage presence, technicality, and crowd reaction. The men of Kearsy wait nervously, expecting to hear their name as host Gina Shandler takes the stage. The bright white light behind her transforms her into a silhouette, as she announces:

It was a very close race this year, with the winner scraping by with only one more point! The winner of the 2007 Battle of the Bands, who will play at Wayzgoose with Rooney and at the Roxy is... Links. For the second year in a row. Congratulations!

Shouts of disbelief echo from the crowd, some calling out Kearsy's name, others The Jakes. But the decision is final. The previously wide grins of Sean, Bentley, Ismet, David, Kevin, Wes, and Brian, morph into tight-set lines. They load their gear back into the cars and head to Sean's house for a small party. After all, there's school tomorrow.

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