

The Place of a Dog: The Samples, October 13 at RIBCO

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 10 October 2007 02:15

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Sean Kelly is the founder, lead singer, and guitarist for the Samples, the Colorado-based bluegrass- and reggae-inspired rockers who make their Rock Island Brewing Company debut on October 13. And if you visit Kelly's MySpace page, you'll find a link labeled "My Musical Family Tree," which includes a list of the musicians who've been members of the band in the years since its inception.

All 19 of them.

"Isn't that *amazing*?" says Kelly, who has certainly seen his share of band turnover since the group's origin in 1987. Yet during a recent phone interview, he insists that the frequent personnel changes within the Samples - staples of the jam-band scene who have performed alongside the likes of Blues Traveler, Phish, and the Dave Matthews Band - have been

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intentional ones.

"I just have always modeled myself after artists like Neil Young," he says. "Ones who have musicians come and go and really keep it fresh. That's been the objective for me.

"The price you pay," he continues, "is a lot of switching up. But as long as that music, in the end, comes across the way it does, I'm doing my job."

Kelly is currently doing his job alongside guitarist Mike Montrey, bassist Jared Johnson, keyboardist Karl Dietel, and drummer Bill Mutchler, and the Samples' RIBCO gig will be the band's 18th stop on a 45-date fall tour that Kelly says "has been going really great. They're always different in their own ways, but playing-wise, there's a sense that we've had really, really good shows."

In addition, though, to employing nearly one band member for every year of the Samples' existence, the group can boast nearly one *album* for every year of its existence, with 18 studio, compilation, and live releases since 1989's self-titled debut LP. (A new release begins pre-production in November.)



The Samples' most recent CD, 2005's *Rehearsing for Life*, features music and lyrics by Kelly, and along with the soulful, up-tempo offerings that the group's fans have come to expect, such songs as "Sad World," "Brown Eyes in the Sun," and "Too Young to Die" are more low-key and

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meditative - understandable, perhaps, considering that Kelly turned 40 the year *Rehearsing for Life* was released. (Life, he says, is "all one big rehearsal.")

Rather than finding inspiration from specific moments in his life, however, Kelly says he's more apt to discover it from "wherever I'm *at* at the time.

"I don't know," he says. "I put so little thought into it. I poke around in my mind on certain things and take notes on certain things, 'cause you just never *know* when it'll happen. But it's all very subconscious.

"You know, writing tunes and stuff is about getting to a real ... almost *thought-less* place," Kelly continues. "Weird as that is. It's not a logical place, and it's an un-judged place. ... It's like the place of a dog. You have to start in a place where you're just *open*. And then you throw it to the world and it's judged."

Currently, the Samples are recording on their own label - Apache Records - but were previously signed by three major ones: Japan's Alpha Records in 1989, Arista Records in 1990, and MCA Records in 1996. All three partnerships ended within their first year, and Kelly finds it difficult to explain exactly why.

"I don't know how to describe it," he says. "First of all, it was *so* long ago. But really, it just didn't seem to be what I needed as an artist."

Kelly says he understands the appeal of a major "if you want to make some business decisions and change your name and your style a bit, or if you found one that just knows what to do with you. But they didn't quite know what to do with the Samples. I think they would now."

So, a decade later, would Kelly at least *consider* a partnership with another major label? "If it made *sense*?" he hypothesizes. "Aw, man, I'd be all *over* it. But it's gotta make

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sense, that's all. It's gotta have an objective. Not just 'to sign.' I don't know I'm not for it or against it, you know?

"But I know a lot of the tricks now," says Kelly with a laugh. "It's kind of hard to pull one over on us, so it's less *enticing* for a company."

In lieu of a major label's support, Kelly is determined to build awareness of the Samples through different means, and these days, the band's founder is finding the best success - and having the most fun doing it - through his and the band's MySpace pages.



"It's really, *really* a cool medium," says Kelly. "It's *so* great. I've got 200-and-something cool videos up there of everything, man. I'm just *constantly* putting stuff up.

"And all the weird, bizarre places that people can see it," he continues, "the people that'll have *a* *ccess* to it Maybe someone will catch it and go, 'Oh my God, where has this *music* been? What's *up* with this?' Like Zach Braff is playing our music, we just found out. He had one of our tunes playing on his MySpace page, and I contacted him, and it turns out he was a huge Samples fan.

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"There's, like, all these different things on the side of the road, so to speak, to tell you you're on the right track," says Kelly. "And those have always been there for me."

Kelly can add Braff to a list of memorable encounters and gigs over the Samples' 20-year career, which include a 1993 appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and a Washington, D.C., performance for President Clinton before his 1996 re-election. (And yes, photos commemorating both events can be found on Kelly's MySpace page.)

Regarding his career highs, Kelly says, "It's so strange, because I just play and *focus* on playing, so a lot of those things that happen are really just neat mile markers. But there's really been so many of them, and they're constant, and random, and odd. I'll find a picture and go, 'Oh, this is so cool! Throw it up online!'"

And here's another thing you'll find online: Kelly's relationship status, which he currently lists as "swinger."

The musician laughs when asked if the label still applies. "I've got a girlfriend," he says. "I've gotta *fix* that."

The Samples *play RIBCO on Saturday, October 13. For more information on the group, visit ([h](http://www.thesamples.com)*

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