

Extra Ordinary: Better Than Ezra, August 18 at River Roots Live

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 08 August 2012 13:20

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When I interviewed Better Than Ezra singer/songwriter/guitarist Kevin Griffin earlier this month, I asked him whether the group's next album – originally conceived as a late-2012 release – had been pushed to next year to mark the band's quarter-century milestone.

"I had no idea that next year will be the 25th anniversary," he said. "Oh my God."

He recovered quickly, though: "This is the 25th-anniversary release, which will ... be our swan song."

He was kidding about Ezra's retirement, saying that "it just felt like the thing to say." And the band certainly shows no signs of quitting at 25 years. The trio is one of the headliners at this year's River Roots Live festival, it continues to regularly produce new music that connects with fans, and Griffin has built a second career writing songs for other artists (including Sugarland, James Blunt, Train, and Debbie Harry) that keeps him busy when Ezra isn't.

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“Putting out new music ... , that makes it worth it for me,” he said. “If I want to write songs for Better Than Ezra, I want those songs to have the ability to get played on the radio, and have that whole life that a hit song can have. I have to believe that the songs on a Better Than Ezra record are worthy of that, rather than just being a road dog and a nostalgia act. At some point – we’ve been around a long time – there’s going to be a bit of nostalgia. I mean, we’re a ’90s band. But I want Ezra to be a vital thing ... [with] fresh music and inspiration going into it.”

The group’s career has generated its share of faint praise, with the band and its music appealing yet somewhat anonymous. (The lyrics to “Extra Ordinary” play off this: “Still I couldn’t get arrested / Though I got more hooks / Than Madonna got looks.”)

But Better Than Ezra has been unusually steady and consistent, with a new studio album arriving every two to four years, and all of them since 1993’s platinum *Deluxe* charting in the United States. The band’s records have also performed steadily better since 1998’s *How Does Your Garden Grow?*

, with 2009’s

Paper Empire

reaching a peak chart position of 62. From

Deluxe

through 2005’s

Before the Robots

, each album has had at least one charting single – although they’ve naturally shifted from the alternative to adult charts.

Beyond commercial durability, Better Than Ezra’s power pop remains sturdy and timeless. Hits such as “Good” and “In the Blood” (both from *Deluxe*) still work surprisingly well and share core strengths with *Paper Empire* songs such as “Turn Up the Bright Lights” and “Black Light.” It’s fair to say the band has earned its longevity.

And Better Than Ezra aims to please, building its shows around hits. “We’re never afraid to play the songs people know, but lately we’ve been getting better at playing deeper cuts in our catalog, for our fans who see us a lot,” Griffin said. And he promised at least a few new songs at River Roots Live.

So don’t be surprised to hear “Good,” “King of New Orleans,” “At the Stars,” “Desperately

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Wanting,” “Porcelain,” and “Under You” in Davenport.

But you shouldn't expect “Rosealia” or “This Time of Year,” Griffin said: “It's kind of like a shirt that you loved. At some point ... one day you put it on, and nothing's changed with the shirt – you took great care of it – but the magic is suddenly gone, and it's relegated to the bottom drawer. And some songs are that way.”

Griffin continues that elusive quest for magic songs, and he said he still doesn't have a recipe after all this time. “If I knew how to always get that, then we'd be U2,” he said. “Playing a song live is the best litmus test Now whether it's going to stand the test of time, you don't know. But instant likability is always a good sign.”

Most things he writes, he said, are “simple songs”: “Simple and weighty and brilliant are not mutually exclusive things. ... Trying to distill what you're trying to convey is always a challenge but ultimately the best way to serve the song.”

Better Than Ezra will perform at 9:30 p.m. on Saturday, August 18, on River Roots Live's south stage. The event takes place in Davenport's LeClaire Park, and admission after 5 p.m. is \$5. For more information, visit RiverRootsLive.com.

For more information on Better Than Ezra, visit BetterThanEzra.com.

River Roots Live Performance Schedule

Friday, August 17

5:30 p.m.: Jason Carl & the Whole Damn Band (South Stage)

6:30 p.m.: The Low Down (North Stage)

7:30 p.m.: Maps & Atlases (South Stage)

8:30 p.m.: The Nighthawks (North Stage)

[9:30 p.m.: Keller Williams with the Travelin' McCourys \(South Stage\)](#)

11 p.m.: Family Groove Company (North Stage)

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Saturday, August 18

noon: Jordan Danielsen (North Stage)

1 p.m.: Orangadang (South Stage)

2 p.m.: American Dust (North Stage)

3 p.m.: Quiet Corral (South Stage)

[4 p.m.: Joe Robinson \(North Stage\)](#)

5 p.m.: Julia Nunes (South Stage)

6 p.m.: Steepwater Band (North Stage)

7 p.m.: Eric Sardinas (South Stage)

8 p.m.: Tonic (North Stage)

9:30 p.m.: Better Than Ezra (South Stage)

11 p.m.: The Congress (North Stage)