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LSU, Louisiana Inspire Better Than Ezra

"Don't think that that it's so strange and worthless in your eyes, well we're quite content in a State Street state of mind." - Better Than Ezra, *State Street State of Mind*

It all started in the late 1980s with an ad in The Daily Reveille, LSU's student newspaper.

LSU student, and drummer, Cary Bonnacaze was looking to form a band, so he placed an ad in The Daily Reveille looking for members: among the respondents were vocalist/guitarist Kevin Griffin, bass player Tom Drummond and guitarist Joel Rundell.

Better Than Ezra, as the quartet christened itself, was in those days a typical college rock band, attending classes at LSU during the week and singing songs they'd written about people they knew at fraternity parties and in bars on Chimes Street and in Tigerland on the weekends.

"I lived on State Street," said Griffin. "'State Street State

of Mind' came from State Street, and a lot of the images in the song 'Rosealia' were about some friends who lived on State Street. Baton Rouge definitely informed the band musically in the early days."

But thanks to their brilliantly constructed rock songs and "anything goes" live shows (in the past they have included dancers dressed as Mrs. Claus, a fan invited on stage to play cowbell on a cover of "Don't Fear the Reaper" and an impromptu reggae reworking of their most well-known song), Better Than Ezra did not remain LSU's best kept secret for long.

In 1995, Griffin—Kevin Griffin, LSU class of '89, that is—led the band to music's promised land, when their debut album "Deluxe," with its megahit single "Good" (No. 3, Billboard Mainstream Rock Charts), went platinum.



(l to r) Jim Payne, Kevin Griffin, Tom Drummond, Michael Jerome.

Courtesy of Rick Olivier

The rest of the decade saw Better Than Ezra—now a New Orleans-based trio following the death of Rundell, and with Travis McNabb on drums in place of Bonnacaze—put their stamp firmly on the charts with three more Billboard Mainstream Rock top-10 hits with "In the Blood," "King of New Orleans" and "Desperately Wanting."

As a result, the audiences got bigger, the stages got bigger and the paychecks got bigger. What stayed the same though was the band's affinity for Baton Rouge—though they are now internationally famous rock stars in their own right, playing to packed houses from the main stage at festivals, they still come back to Baton Rouge on a regular basis to perform at The Varsity and LSU's Groovin' on the Grounds.

"We have some amazing memories, and every time we go back, it's a walk down memory lane," said Griffin.

The new millennium produced its share of high points for Better Than Ezra: "Extra Ordinary," "A Lifetime," "Our Last Night" and "Juicy" all cracked the top-30 on the Billboard Adult Top 40 charts—"Juicy" even showed up in commercials for the TV show *Desperate Housewives*—and Taylor Swift covered "Breathless" during the Hope for Haiti telethon to raise money for victims of the Haiti earthquake.

The 2000s also produced their share of changes, too. The band went through three labels. Griffin moved to Los Angeles following Hurricane Katrina and then relocated to Nashville due to the increased demand for his songwriting talents. McNabb moved to Nashville and eventually left the band to join the country group Sugarland and was replaced by L.A.-based drummer Michael Jerome.

But through the band's rise to rock royalty, the relocation of its members and sporadic changing of its lineup, there has always been one simple, grounding constant for Better Than Ezra: The Pelican State.

In addition to the songs that were directly inspired by their time at LSU, many of the band's other songs have

Southern Louisiana coursing through their veins, including "Southern Girl," "King of New Orleans," "WWOZ" and "A Southern Thing" (about a felon from Baton Rouge and a sorority sister from Tulane going on an interstate crime spree).

"All through the history of the band, rhythmically and lyrically, Louisiana is all through it," said Griffin.

And what of "Desperately Wanting," the 1996 hit that reached No. 10 on Billboard's Mainstream Rock charts? The one widely rumored to be about Griffin's experiences with the Kappa Sigma fraternity at LSU?

Not true, said Griffin.

"Jim Payne (touring keyboardist/guitarist) and I were in the Kappa Sigma fraternity at LSU," said Griffin. "For some reason it got out that 'Desperately Wanting' was about being a pledge, but the reality is it had nothing to do with that. But all around the country, whenever we play it, guys in their [Kappa Sigma] shirts love it."

While Better Than Ezra has made a healthy living singing about Louisiana, the band also makes a point of giving back to its home state. Drummond may be the only current full-time member of the band still living in Louisiana, but the Crescent City is still the home of Better Than Ezra and its affiliated charity, the Better Than Ezra Foundation.

The foundation hosts an annual celebrity bowling tournament to raise money to fulfill the mission of committing "funding towards the renewal of the structural and cultural heritage of New Orleans and Southern Louisiana."

The Better Than Ezra Foundation has already helped the New Orleans Fire Department and funded the creation of a "Splash Park" at Audubon Zoo, and in 2010, set its sights on helping students at Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary.

Bethune Elementary has 350 students, almost all of whom qualify for free or reduced lunches, and many of whom are "single parent, if any parent," according to Principal Mary Haynes-Smith.

"Most of these kids are really bright kids, but they've been thrown out of other schools because they just have some issues," said Haynes-Smith.

"We needed to understand where our kids came from. Inside each and every one of our kids was something waiting to be discovered."

What Haynes-Smith and the rest of the Bethune faculty

BTE - by the Numbers

- 3 Highest position on the Billboard Mainstream Rock chart for "Good"
- 3 Highest position on the Billboard Top Independent Albums chart for studio album **Before the Robots**
- 6 Highest position on the Billboard Mainstream Rock chart for "In the Blood"
- 7 Highest position on the Billboard Mainstream Rock chart for "King of New Orleans"
- 1 Highest position on the

discovered was that the students, despite their behavioral issues, were extremely academically talented. In 2009, every single fourth-grade student passed the LEAP test, with 14 percent testing as "advanced" in English with a further 79 percent testing at "mastery" level.

"One of our board members was friends with Woody Koppel on the school board in New Orleans," said Drummond. "We asked him what could we do that would make the most impact. He put us in touch with Mary Haynes-Smith, and said, 'They're already doing great things, let's help them keep it that way and maybe do something better.' It's one of the top-scoring schools around, so we're trying to help them."

After arranging to provide the things Haynes-Smith requested—pencils, paper and school supplies—the band went the extra mile and gave the students something they won't quickly forget.

"I said, 'We don't have any toys for the pre-K kids, we don't have anything for them to play with,'" said Haynes-Smith. "And so they said, 'We'll get back with you.' Then they came and met the kids and said they'd do a play yard. A play yard? We thought we were getting a swing. Before we knew it we were sitting down with a lady who designs play yards, and here we are today."

Better Than Ezra doesn't plan on stopping with school supplies and playgrounds either.

"Inside, the classrooms are overcrowded and the materials are old," said Drummond. "We're thinking our next project for them may be to build lockers in the halls. It doesn't sound very romantic, but that's what they need."

"We've adopted this school," added Griffin. "We are talking about setting up a scholarship for them and helping these kids through."

"The foundation has become bigger than the band, we're just the mouthpiece for it now. It started off with modest expectations, but it's really taken off. You get to a point where you're doing what you do and you want to give back. It sounds cliché, but it's true."

Better Than Ezra's latest venture is the Krewe of Rocckus, a Mardi Gras extravaganza that Griffin describes as

7 Billboard Top Independent Albums chart for studio album **Paper Empire**

10 Highest position on the Billboard Mainstream Rock chart for **"Desperately Wanting"**

13 Highest position on the Billboard Adult Top 40 chart for **"Extra Ordinary"** and **"A Lifetime"**

23 Highest position on the Billboard Adult Top 40 chart for **"At the Stars"**

25 Highest position on the Billboard Adult Top 40 chart for **"Juicy"**

28 Highest position on the Billboard Adult Top 40 chart for **"Our Last Night"**

35 Highest position on the Billboard 200 chart for studio album **Deluxe**

1.8 million number of copies of **Deluxe** sold to date

a "three-day destination event" designed to bring tourists to New Orleans who may otherwise be hesitant about setting foot in the land of the French Quarter and riverboat casinos.

"Tom came up with the name Krewe of Rocckus," said Griffin. "There are rock cruises that John Mayer and Kid Rock do; they're very successful. We were a little bit envious of their entrepreneurship, and we thought we'd do that. We're from New Orleans, so let's turn the French Quarter and Harrah's into an on-land cruise ship."

"We made it all walking distance because we didn't want anyone to have to worry about transportation," started Drummond. "We have lunch with award-winning chef John Besh..."

"... and a Bloody Mary making competition hosted by Tom Drummond," finished Griffin. "You've got parades, a private viewing area on St. Charles, food and live music. We'll be there the whole time."

"There's going to be music at every event. We found that people were intrigued by the idea of Mardi Gras, but they weren't in college anymore. They were in their late 20s or older, and they thought they'd love to do it but it was too much work."

The band had modest goals for its inaugural Krewe, and quickly exceeded them. A nationwide tour dubbed the "Road to Mardi Gras Tour" saw people in 20 U.S. states and three Canadian provinces snap up tickets for Krewe of Rocckus.

The event, which includes gift packs for attendees, second lines and private parade viewing areas, is highlighted by two separate concerts at the House of Blues. On the second night, March 4, Better Than Ezra will open for Pat Green by playing "Deluxe" in its entirety for the first time ever. On the final night of Krewe of Rocckus, March 5, the band will take the stage for a headliner set which, if past Better Than Ezra concerts are any indication, will definitely be memorable.

Laissez les bon temps rouler, indeed.

The band hopes that the 2011 incarnation of Krewe of Rocckus is just the beginning, and the possibility exists to eventually enter a float in a Mardi Gras parade.

"Probably Orpheus because it makes the most sense," Drummond said. "How cool would that be?"

For now though, the band is content with the knowledge that Krewe of Rocckus is doing its part to bolster the tourism industry in an iconic city that, while famed for its food and music, is still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. If Better Than Ezra's fans, dubbed "Ezralites," come away from Krewe of Rocckus with a love of South Louisiana that matches that felt by the former LSU students who make up the band, not only will Krewe



Kevin Griffin, class of '89 and Better Than Ezra frontman, works on Bethune Elementary playground.

Eddy Perez/LSU University Relations

of Rocckus be a success for years to come, but the tourism industry in general will get a healthy boost thanks to its native sons.

"When people come to New Orleans they come back," Griffin said. "People fall in love with the place."

And it all started with an ad in The Daily Reveille.

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