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IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE "MATURE" rockers proud. At a time when the sad cliché is "no one sells records anymore," Greta Van Fleet is generating sustained flurries of wild anticipation for its upcoming full-length album. Furthermore, when some 6-string disciples seem to have perpetually furrowed brows over the future of their favorite instrument, it's a GUITAR album.

Yeah, that's "guitar" in all capital letters, because 22-year-old guitarist Jake Kiszka is not only a lover of big riffs, guitar solos, and a battered '61 Gibson Les Paul, he is also generating massive excitement amongst pre-teens, teens, Millennials, adults, and even senior citizens about guitar music.

The media and fan frenzies have continued unabated since the band's 2017 debut EP, *Black Smoke Rising* [Republic], unleashed the song heard 'round the planet, "Highway Song." A double EP, *From the Fires*, hit just seven months later, combining new recordings with the songs on the debut, and produced another hit, "Safari Song." Both tunes topped the Billboard charts, and, in fact, "Highway Song" became the fastest debut single from a band to reach number-one on the Mainstream Rock chart in almost 16 years.

But even with all the critical acclaim and sold-out headliner tours, the Frankenthumb, Michigan band of brothers—in addition to Jake, there's vocalist Josh Kiszka and bassist/keyboardist Sam Kiszka, along

with drummer Danny Wagner—also has a bit of a musical albatross around its neck. Detractors—and even some fans—point to the very obvious Led Zeppelin influences. Zep vocalist Robert Plant himself told *Loudwire*, "There's a band in Detroit called Greta Van Fleet. They are *Led Zeppelin I*. Beautiful little singer. I hate him. He borrowed his voice from somebody I know very well." It was a bit of a joke, but, nonetheless, the band's handlers reportedly have been concerned about the press regurgitating the Led Zeppelin comparisons—especially as the upcoming album is supposed to show growth and diversity.

Time will tell—we hadn't heard the new release at press time—but whatever it ends up sounding like, Greta Van Fleet



A CHANGE IS GONNA COME

JAKE KISZKA
AND GRETA VAN FLEET GIVE RIFF ROCK
A KICK IN THE BUTT

is certainly doing a mammoth and much-appreciated job of putting guitar back in the mainstream media. As for Jake, his enthusiastic assimilation of everything from the blues to the Beatles to Simon & Garfunkel and the young bands of now makes for a winning potpourri of modern guitar culture. He's no one-trick stylist, he really loves to play, he's totally committed and passionate, and, hey, the guy can rock.

What really makes you guys tick?

When we were growing up, we all listened to the foundation of the blues. Later on, we heard the British evolutions of the blues in rock, and that's what partially inspired us to reinterpret the blues or folk or anything, and try to do something

different with them. We feel the older blues artists kind of established a lot of song arrangements that bands are still doing today, and it's our job to stretch out those formats and take a different direction. We're aware that listening to Simon & Garfunkel, and things like that, can help us incorporate more distinctive elements into our own music. I'm a guitarist, and a huge fan of riff writing, so I listen for unique approaches that I can use. I want to push the boundaries of what someone would typically do with a riff or a solo.

It's interesting that you gravitated to blues music. For example, you could

have rejected the music your parents might have been playing at home, and gone bonkers for EDM.

Well, those old blues guys are way cooler than anyone else. When I listen to a lot of contemporary artists, there just isn't the same amount of emotion, so it doesn't affect me the same way. You could hear a lot of truth in what was being written back then. It came through, and it touched you, and it didn't sound so manufactured. It made us *feel*.

Do you feel that, sometimes, the public has a hard time differentiating true emotion from manufactured, well-written pop music?

I think people basically like what they're given. If what they're given is

BY MICHAEL MOLENDRA

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF FASANO

stenciled and familiar, and it's played over and over, eventually they're going to like it. But when you hear something real, you feel it, because you can't manufacture emotion. You can't take short cuts. I also don't think it's a negative thing that there's bad music out there in the world, because when you listen to something that's bad, it teaches you what *not* to do.

Has any music particularly informed the sessions for the new album?

I was listening to a lot of Allman Brothers on tour, and Duane inspired some of my arrangements of solos. That was something premeditated. I've also been listening to way more Beatles than I ever have before, as well as some of the stuff on *Sticky Fingers* by the Stones, and a lot of folk music. I've been getting into more Mumford & Sons, as well as the Black Keys, Kaleo, Fleet Foxes, and a duo from Sweden called First Aid Kit. They're pretty phenomenal. All of this music helped me bring more elements of light and shade

to the album—acoustic material, heavy rock and roll, and even some experimental stuff.

You mentioned a premeditated approach to Duane Allman's influence. Do many of your other influences dig into your brain more or less precisely?

When we're onstage and it's time for me to take off in one direction or another, it's pretty off the cuff and natural. I listen to all this stuff, and it just flows through me, and whatever comes out, comes out. It's interesting. A lot of weird things go on that way, so I think it's best when I just do it, and it's *not* so premeditated. A lot of stuff catches me off guard when it's not so thought out. It's more of an emotional thing.

So did you find yourself improvising solos more in the studio, or writing out structured lines?

There are certain licks I incorporate often, because I like them. But, for the most part, I like to screw around and jam, and let my emotions guide me. Once I have the initial

approach down, I'll start honing in on the notes I like. I try not to let the process take too long, though, because that just crushes the emotion. It also really helps me to throw away all the rules, and take an approach that's entirely open minded—even if what I initially play doesn't make sense. Usually, out of that forced confusion comes something that's unique.

Does the band tend to record basic tracks live in the studio?

Usually, all four of us play together to get a basic track down, because we want that shared energy and emotion.


Your vibrato is sounding really awesome on some of the more recent live videos on YouTube. It's kind of interesting and strange how you bend strings. Where did that come from?

Very early on, vibrato was a huge focus of mine. I was trying to emulate Clapton's vibrato, but I never learned the proper way to do it. You're supposed to bend the strings



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upward, but unless I'm bending the high-E string, I pull the strings *down*, and my vibrato tends to get a bit faster as I bend closer to the other strings.

Can you detail some of the gear you've been using lately—stuff we might hear on the new album, as well?

I have a 1961 Gibson Les Paul with two PAF humbuckers and a Gibson Custom Shop SG. Then, there's a Coodercaster, which our producer Al Sutton helped build. It's basically a Strat with lap-steel pickups, and it has a dirty, rough tone, so I use it when I need something really aggressive. What constitutes a good electric guitar for me are pickups that are very receptive, so I can knock anywhere on the guitar, and I can hear that sound coming through the amplifier. I don't just use the strings, I like to grab the guitar neck and bend it, and maybe knock against the body with my knee. I want the whole instrument to be amplified. For acoustics, I have a Gibson Hummingbird and a J-45, which

sounds incredible. I like using D'Addario strings—a .010 set.

My amplifiers are a Marshall Astoria CME and a Vox AC30. I kind of go back and forth between the two. There's also a boutique company out of the east side of Detroit that has a very impressive-sounding amplifier that I used. I'm not really a fan of pedals, because I don't want to lean on anything and sort of manufacture a tonality that's not naturally there. But I do have an Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail Reverb, and a Jext Telez Range Loard that has come in handy quite a bit for the album—especially for solos. It's a very interesting tone. There's some wah-wah on the album, as well.

How do you personally view the health of the guitar and guitar music these days?

There might not be as many players now as in the past, but there are still a lot of young guitarists out there. The guitar is historically significant for changing a lot of things musically, and I don't think it's done growing. But I do think it's going to take a

bunch of people—young and old—to take the guitar and elevate it. We have to try to vary our approaches and create something new to keep the guitar evolving.

Did you think we guitarists can band together in some way and achieve that goal?

I think what separates a guitarist from a great guitarist is his or her ability to apply emotion to what they are doing. It has to come right from your heart through your hands to the guitar. There can't be a wall of moderation. I suppose the best way to say it is to surrender yourself to what you're playing.

For us, the mission we set out on was to play the truth. Some people might be caught off guard by it, *because* it's truthful, and they're not used to the sort of music that speaks from your soul, and emits truth, meaning, and purpose—rather than manufactured emotion. But I think if guitarists are uninhibited, and delve into the song and express emotion, then guitar music will continue to affect people. ■

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