



Bringing home the Bacon Brothers

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By *DIANE LEIGH DAVISON*,
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Singing duo comes to Baltimore's Rams Head Live!

The Bacon Brothers, Kevin and Michael, have been recording and performing professionally since 1995. Michael is an Emmy award-winning composer, scoring many Oscar-nominated feature films and television movies, as well as composing songs recorded by artists as diverse as Perry Como; Jerry Lee Lewis; and Claude François, one of the biggest stars of French rock 'n' roll. Kevin is the award-winning actor and director known for his diverse and extensive film roles.

Their latest album is "White Knuckles" on their own Forosoco label, and they performed last night at The Ram's Head Live! in Baltimore. (Review next week.) Oh, and, yes, they always do perform "Footloose"

The following is part of my recent interview with them.

Diane Davison: How often do you get to co-write with Michael?

Kevin Bacon: We don't really write too much anymore together because we're both really busy with other stuff. Basically the way it works is I write something, and generally I'll demo it, and he'll write something and generally demo it in studios, and then we will play it for each other. Sometimes it will be a situation where ... he'll say, "Look, I think it needs a bridge," or "I think we should rework this," or "I didn't quite understand the hook," or whatever. And I'll go back to the drawing board. But it's been a while since we actually sat down, two guitars, looked at each other and actually written stuff down.

DD: So do you actually work on the same song and pass it back and forth, or you work on independent songs and just comment to each other?



The Bacon Brothers, Kevin and Michael

KB: Yeah, we just work on independent songs and comment to each other. ... I do a lot of writing when I'm making movies, so I'm kind of like off on my own, you know. I would like to someday experiment more with Michael and with other writers, too. ... But I've always just kind of been more comfortable just in my own head. The thing of it is that the ideas for songs — lyrics, melodies — sometimes they don't happen when you're actually just sitting in the room. Sometimes they happen when you're walking down the street, or four o'clock in the morning I wake up and I have lyrics, and I gotta write them down. Writing with another writer sort of requires the creativity to happen on more like a 9-to-5 basis [chuckling].

DD: What is your writing process?

MB: One needs down time to write songs. I have very little of that, so it's hard. If I can write one decent song a year, I'm happy.

DD: What song did you write that Claude François recorded, and how did that come about?

MB: It's called "L'amour vient, l'amour va." It was translated from my English version by the late Eddy Marnet and was on Claude's last record [deceased 1978].

DD: Since you were a child, did you have music or lyrics in your head?

KB: Always. Yeah, always. I mean I probably wrote my first full song — music, lyrics — when I was probably 12. You know, a love song of course — heartbreak. Something every 12-year-old knows nothing about, but [laughs] that's what came to me. I didn't really have any instrument other than percussion I used to have to sing the melody to my brother because I'd have the melody in my head but I just didn't have the chord changes, and then he would figure out how to play it on his keyboard or on the guitar.

DD: Was he self-taught, or was he classically trained?

KB: He started out being classically trained on cello, and then eventually he kind of moved off the cello and started playing the acoustic guitar, which was really his first instrument in a way, and banjo. He could play pretty much anything. He's also a great sight reader. He can arrange and compose, score. He's a real musician's musician.

DD: And what instruments do you play?

KB: I play the guitar, which I picked up as a tool for writing

DD: Entirely self-taught, or did you study at all?

KB: Self-taught. I picked up things from other guitar players — my brother and people that you run into. I play harmonica a little bit, and I play percussion. Those are the three things I play in the band

DD: Are you teaching your children music, too?

KB: Well, I don't teach them. My son is a guitar player and a bass player and plays in a couple of bands and is a helluva way better guitar player than I play, which isn't saying much because he really is very, very talented. His first word was "guitar." And my daughter, who's 13, has no interest at this point in pursuing anything from a professional standpoint. But I would kill to be able to sing like that. A really gorgeous voice.

DD: How do you compare the musician process to acting? To me, when you're recording an

album it's like filming a movie, and rehearsing or performing live [is more like theater].

KB: I think a lot of what happens sometimes is that you feel something live, and you feel like you have one night, one show, or one song, or one lick that you sing that really feels great, and then you try to get it back in the studio, and it doesn't always click. It's sort of like that [contrast] between theater and film. The studio is a very controlled sort of place. So a lot of what I try to do if I'm in the studio is try to get back that feeling that we had live.

DD: Michael, do you prefer the film composing or popular music writing/performing and why?

Michael Bacon: If I didn't have both, it would be unsatisfying. Composing is a lonely endeavor; performing is very social.

DD: Do you feel there is less credibility for actors who sing versus singers who act.

KB: I think that most people in their heart of hearts think that acting is kind of easy. People probably think, 'Well hell, if I looked like Brad Pitt, then I'd be a big star, too.' And I think most people realize that writing music and playing music is hard. ... I don't think there's a lot of people out there who go, 'Oh I could do what Bruce Springsteen does; that's easy.' So when you see somebody cross over from acting into music there's a real distrust of that. We make our actors into royalty, but we really make musicians like gods. They're not mortal because music has such a powerful impact on our lives. That's just a cross that you have to bear if you're an actor in a band; it's just the way it's going to go. We just keep trying to write and trying to keep our songs good, and trying to keep the level of the show up ... and you know, do rock 'n' roll.

DD: What are your thoughts on artists/entertainers being involved and outspoken in politics and other social issues, and the backlash lately from the public on such positions by its entertainers?

MB: I think it's fine if they are truly speaking from their heart and not an image dynamic or group think. It also can be self-serving as providing publicity.

DD: What is your take on the present-day music business?

KB: Everybody's always complaining about the business; it's tough; it's tough. You have the two sides of the coin because of digital explosion. One is that you have a lot of piracy and file sharing, which is sometimes very detrimental to the artist. The other side of it is that things can get out there and can get shared, and you can get exposure in ways they never could before. The Internet can be a very powerful thing; you read about myspace [myspace.com] and bands that have bandspace [bandspace.com]. We don't have the ability to control the music business. We can only keep making music and hoping that we can have some kind of a business [laughing] out of it.

DD: Do you still go over your contracts in detail with your lawyers; how much are you now versed in law?

MB: I don't use lawyers that much because I'm very well-versed in the kind of contracts I sign for film and TV work.

DD: Toughest negotiating point in your contracts?

MB: Retaining publishing.

KB: With movies, the thing that always gets the ugliest is billing. It seems like such a silly thing, you wonder how much people notice that. But time and time again what I find is that you'll agree on the money pretty quickly because they say, 'Look, this is what we have, and this is what we don't have.'

DD: I was looking online through some of your records. Each time you were with a different record label. So what's been the process?

KB: It's been different every time. On the first record we were picked up, and it was a very small label. It was a kind of traditional record deal. This guy who was interested in getting us into the record business had seed money. He really believed in the Bacon Brothers and put the album out in a very traditional way. It was great, and it was great for us. The second record was also on that label, although things kind of changed legally on that side. The label name became different, but it was essentially the same organization. The third one, we were picked up by a company named Rounder.

DD: Did Rounder buy out your contract, or was it only a two-record deal with the other guy?

KB: No, they didn't have to buy us out. I can't remember what happened with the masters, if they bought the masters. ...The third thing was a DVD company. And on this record [White Knuckles] we decided to go a completely different route. Instead, we had a very specific idea about the way that we wanted to record it, and we wanted to have complete control. So rather than do demos and go to masters and shop it and try to get another label to pick us up, we decided, OK, we'll just go in, and we'll pay for it ourselves. We'll do it the way that we want to do it. And within a couple months of having finished it, we were picked up.

DD: Who influenced you the most musically?

KB: It's really my brother who was the first artist I heard sing in our basement [laugh]. And the music that he brought home was that of the British invasion: The Stones, The Beatles and [Led] Zeppelin. The music of [Jimi] Hendrix, Big Brother & the Holding Company, Buffalo Springfield. I also had a really big soul influence. I had a little AM radio I listened to in Philadelphia — Philly Sound, soul: Spinners, Stylistics, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes; and then all the Motown stuff — Marvin Gaye was a big, big influence. I try to keep listening to music. Sometimes I hear a song on the radio, and I say, 'Oh, you know I have to write because that's really good!' [laughs].

MB: Classical, opera, Broadway, folk and blues, country, Jug Band, Stones, Beatles, [James] Taylor, Joni [Mitchell], The Band.

DD: Who would you love to jam with? Who's your dream artist to perform with?

KB: We already had this amazing dream come true quite a few years ago. [Our] favorite band is The Band; we love the music. Even though Robbie Robertson was no longer with The Band, before Rick Danko died, we got an opportunity at the last minute to go to Carnegie Hall and open for them. At the end of the show they asked us to come out on stage and sing "Willie and the Hand Jive" [Johnny Otis]. It was amazing, I mean, it was a real seminal moment in both of our musical lives. So if I never get a chance to jam with anybody else, I'll be fine. [laughs]

DD: What have you been listening to recently?

MB: I like The Jayhawks a lot.

KB: You know, I like all kinds of stuff. I'll listen to everything from 50 Cent, Keane ... a lot of different music.

DD: Since you kind of entered Michael's world in singing, have you become somewhat competitive with him in that vein?

KB: I think there's always a healthy kind of competition between brothers that's gonna be there. But there are things he does musically that I will never be able to do, and I just kind of know that and accept it.

MB: As I'm nine years older, the battling-brothers syndrome really didn't apply, and still doesn't. I did beat him arm wrestling on national TV.

DD: John Waters or Barry Levinson?

KB: I love both of those guys, but you know I worked with Barry twice. I'm a big John Waters fan, and I would love to do a picture with him. But you know, I was in Barry's first movie [Diner, 1983].

DD: When in Baltimore, where are your favorite places to hang out?

KB: Fells Point. BOP still there? [laughing] An amazing pizza place. Obrycki's.

DD: You like steamed crabs?

KB: I love them. It's like a great, great, great dinner.

DD: Answer me a question you've never been asked, that you would like to address ...

MB: What is the most important discipline to study? Counterpoint.

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