

THE COMMOTIONS // VOLUME II

Some people let adages and axioms slide off their shoulders. Others recognize their essential wisdom and run with them. A sterling example of the latter is the Commotions, for whom the sage chestnut, “Go big or go home” acts as a kind of roadmap for navigating the way forward.

It’s not just that the dapper Ottawa-based combo— 11 regular members plus a touring vocalist — has two lead singers, three songwriters, and a five-piece horn section featuring tenor and baritone sax, a pair of trumpets, and a trombone. Or that the guest line-up on their vibrant new album *Volume II* includes another 15 souls, among them some of the best musicians on the planet.

The Commotions write epic, sparkling, uncommonly skilled jazzy, funky soul/pop that, depending where you are on *Volume II*, conjure everything from Motown to Stax to Jake and Elwood. If this was the 1970s, *The Sonny & Cher Show* would be duking it out with Lola Falana to book the band for a marquee spot.

That’s not to say the Commotions are retro, exactly, though their forebears are well served by the band’s unparalleled musicianship and palpable enthusiasm. Rather, as musical director, producer, songwriter, and tenor sax ace Brian Asselin explains, the Commotions are more about reclaiming the spirit of soul that the beforementioned imprints — and the legendary artists on their rosters — championed.

Except, of course, the Commotions do it bigger.

“I feel like soul music is the music of the people,” Asselin says. “If you look at all the iconic soul performers like Marvin Gaye or even the Temptations or the Supremes, they were documenting what was happening in the world. Soul music spoke to that. We are trying to do that today.

“I do see some kindred spirits out there, people like Bruno Mars or a band I saw recently called St. Paul & The Broken Bones. Also, Mayer Hawthorne and some stuff coming out of Stones Throw Records on the West Coast. Justin Timberlake toured with a horn section. I really hope our album helps to put Canada on the soul-music map. We have some fantastic soul artists here, many of them my idols.”

That statement only seems unduly ambitious to anyone who hasn’t read the liner notes of *Volume II*.

The Commotions features Rebecca Noelle, a respected singer/songwriter in her own right — see her dazzling *Soulstice* album featuring co-writes with Asselin, and her victorious turn on Quebec TV talent show *La Voix*. Noelle’s resume also lists performances on stages worldwide alongside Bonnie Raitt, B.B. King, and Buddy Guy, to name a few.

And there is co-lead vocalist Jeff Rogers (the Cooper Brothers), guitarist and co-songwriter David Gaw, bassist Ken Seeley, keyboardist Steve Boudreau, drummer Jeff Asselin, trumpeters Fred Paci and Ed Lister, trombonist Steve Berndt and baritone saxophonist Richard Page.

Volume II’s guest list is just as starry, including (but not limited to) Philosopher King Jarvis Church, MonkeyJunk’s Steve Marriner, Juno-nominated saxophonist Petr Cancura, and Ottawa jazz great Mark Ferguson, who handled the album’s string arrangements.

The Commotions’ personnel may be head-spinning but the convergence of all that talent is pure, rump-shaking sonic joy. Take sizzling lead single “Let Me Kiss You Baby” which finds Noelle’s gravity-defying

voice conjuring a take-charge woman while strings swirl, horns skronk, and a can't-miss chorus leaps to the foreground.

At the other end of the spectrum is the keyboard-guided "Loving You," the album's sole ballad written by Asselin and delivered by vocalist Rogers with a mix of swaggering romanticism and knock-kneed shivers. And then there's "Masquerade" ("A tough one to write," Asselin chuckles), a brassy barn-burner with a dash of doo-wop vocals and a show-stopping sax solo. Naturally.

Given that the Commotions have three songwriters and 11 musicians with varying frames of musical reference, one wonders how a song *ever* gets finished, much less written and recorded with aplomb as were the 13 tracks on *Volume II*, cut primarily at Ottawa's Metropolitan Studios with engineer and co-producer Jason Jaknunas.

Noelle howls at the question. "Brian is definitely the mastermind of the project but he is also open to suggestion because he wants the music to be the best it can be. He will take a song that he may think is finished and run it past the room and someone will say, 'Well, what about this' and someone else will say, 'Well, what about that?' Brian is super-open to that," she says. "You never feel like you're stepping on anyone's toes."

As for who sings what — Noelle or Rogers — it often simply comes down to gender. "Songs written from a masculine perspective typically fall to Jeff," Noelle says. "Other times, I'd end up working so much on a song that it was transformed into a female perspective."

"I was fortunate enough to have toured with the Funk Brothers as their saxophonist for a couple years on their Canadian dates," Asselin offers by way of back story. Keeners will note that the Asselins and Commotions bandmates Ed Lister and Steve Berndt also performed together as the Jivewires. And Brian Asselin's CV features stints with the Four Tops and the Temptations. He also plays piano, handy for composition.

Asselin continues: "I also wrote and produced an album for their lead singer, Delbert Nelson. The band at the time was called Delbert & The Commotions and we released one album with a couple of songs being showcased on both ABC (*The Fosters*) and HBO (*Looking*). But the Commotions is my baby. And it just wouldn't be the same without Rebecca or David Gaw, our other songwriter who also plays guitar. He is fantastic."

If the logistics of touring with (and feeding and housing...) 12 people are daunting, neither Asselin nor Noelle is letting on. Both insist live performance is where the Commotions soar highest and they are determined to take *Volume II* to audiences across Canada and beyond.

"If I could see this band playing some festivals, and maybe have some people buy the album after seeing us play at festivals, that would be success," Asselin says. "Also making enough money to bring all 12 people on the road. That's important to me."

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