



Eating Up The Music Industry: Jimmy Eat World explains the trials and tribulations since leaving town

By Dan Marek

On July 23, over 2000 fans piled into Phoenix's Web Theatre for a free record-release show (sponsored by Zia Records) to support one of Arizona's biggest underdogs. The same faces that watched Jimmy Eat World play all-ages shows at venues and churches in 1994 returned to see the four Mesa bandmates break the mold for major labels and beat the odds with their fourth LP, *Bleed American*.

The show came shortly after the return of J.E.W.'s successful first European tour, a switch to Dreamworks Records, self-financing the recording costs for *Bleed American* after Capitol Records dropped them, and a slew of packed shows in a part of the world where most people had never heard of Mesa, Arizona.

THE BEGINNING:

In 1994, a group of four friends from rival schools began breaking down the barriers between Mountain View High School and Westwood High School in Mesa to reach for the shiny possibilities of record labels, national tours, and of course, a debut album.

After recording their first show on a tape player, the band decided to record a demo at Central Christian Church, where drummer Zach Lind knew the music director. "They had some digital recording equipment so we made our first demo there," said Jim Atkins, the band's vocalist and guitarist. "Our first real recording was a seven-inch that Steve Naughton recorded for us at this little Phoenix recording studio he had way back in the day. Basically, for our first real show with other local bands we went to Price Club and bought blank tapes, made up our own art and passed them out for free. Steve had spent a good month recording metal bands that spent a lot of money on an engineer. He came and saw us play, we gave him a tape and he liked it, so he said he'd record us for free."

Although the band had their recording finished, they still needed the backing of a label to release the record to local shops. They didn't have to go to far to find the perfect label to release the seven-inch—Adkins' roommate had recently started an independent record label dubbed Wooden Blue Records.

"Him and a couple other people that were involved in

underground punk production companies had this collective label," Atkins said. "They put out our first record. It wasn't like, 'all right, we got these songs, now who's going to give us the best deal to put them out?' It was more like my roommate said, 'yeah, I'll put out your record,' and I was just like, 'Okay.'"

After supporting their new seven-inch, the band decided to start recording split albums with bands from other states to increase their nationwide audience. "The reason we did splits with other bands was because we liked the people who were involved with the labels themselves, and we also had a mutual respect for the band that we did the split with," Adkins said. "It helps, especially when you're first starting out, because fans of one band buy the record and hear the other band. If the bands like each other and respect each other's music, it's probable that their fans will like the other band. It was a good tool to get us exposed in other parts of the country where our records had a hard time being distributed."

The plan paid off. When the Colorado-based Curtsy Front Drive, who split a record with J.E.W., played a show for Capitol records, an A&R rep saw the potential for both bands on the label. "I got home from school one day and my roommate said, 'Some guy from Capitol called,'" Adkins said. "I was like, 'Whatever.' He may have actually called, but, whatever. Those people never return my calls. I guess the guy from Capitol called my roommate again and asked when we were playing next. He came out and saw us play, and that night he expressed his interest in perhaps working with us. We took him up on it. So in the beginning we never really shopped, never looked around too much. Every opportunity that came by, we kind of thought that we were getting away with something by taking it."

But "Getting away" with a major label contract may not have been everything J.E.W. expected. "We basically had no idea what to expect," Adkins said. "We were kinda coming from having nothing, so anything we got, we assumed that this is how it is. They gave us money to get an '82 Chevy van, and that was our means of transportation for three or four years. We didn't really know how labels worked or anything, we just did it as a way to get out of Arizona."

Getting out of Arizona was a great accomplishment for the band, but when they got out on the road to support their Capitol debut *Static Prevails*, J.E.W. began to realize that their deal may not have been the golden

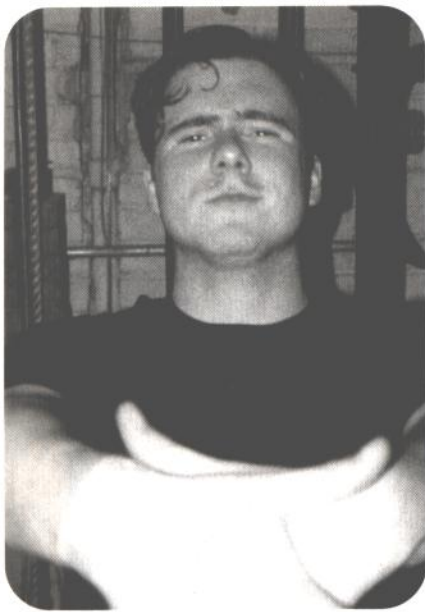
opportunity they were waiting for. "There wasn't really anyone waiting for the record to come out besides the couple thousand people who bought our seven-inch single," Adkins said. "So no booking agents wanted to take us on. We pretty much did the booking ourselves, just meeting up with the other bands that we did the splits with. It was really an independent tour, even though we were on Capitol. In fact, our drummer booked our first national tour and we played to an average of six people a night, bar staff included, for a month and a half."

While touring across the country in a beat-up van playing for six people a night, the band began to feel that something was wrong. It had become obvious that Capitol set Jimmy Eat World on the back burner and wasn't really concerned with the shape their career was taking.

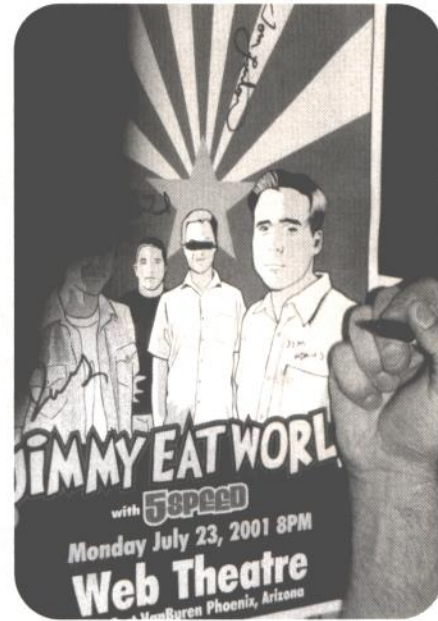
THE CAPITOL FIASCO:

"Problems started to rise when we started to get a small momentum building up behind us," Adkins said. "We got on some pretty good tours opening up for the Get Up Kids and Promise Ring. We'd started on this independent level and started to get this kind of national awareness where people were starting to notice a little more. They [Capitol] wouldn't take the momentum that we built and help push it. That was kind of tricky. When we recorded the *Clarity* record we took a couple of tunes from that, and, while we were waiting for the record to come out, decided [with the label's consent] to put out an EP with them. When we were making *Clarity*, only one person ever came down to the studio from the label, and that was to take their picture with us for *Billboard*. It's funny because KROQ added 'Lucky Denver Mint'. The label didn't really have a plan if they actually played it, so when KROQ started playing it, Capitol was kind of scrambling to catch up, and it was just a big fiasco. At that point we knew that Capitol wasn't for us. They got a new president, and over the next six months every head of every department was gone, so what little relationship we had built at the label had gone—even our A&R guy left. So there was really no reason for us to be there anymore."

The band finally had enough, and asked Capitol to release them from their contract. Capitol didn't hesitate to drop J.E.W.'s contract and let them try the business on their own. (continued on page 2)



Jimmy Eat World greet old fans at the Web Theatre, July 23rd. Photos courtesy of Dan Merek.



"I don't think any of us thought that we were going out on a limb by getting out of our deal," Adkins said. "After we got out of our deal a lot of people were like, 'Oh man, what are you going to do?' A lot of people thought we were going to break up. I was like, 'Are you kidding me, we're going to do everything now—we're free.' We looked at it as a very liberating experience."

One week after they were released from Capitol, and without financial backing, the band headed out for their first European tour. To help their chances in a new market left untapped by Capitol, the band decided to buy back their records from Capitol's distribution and resell them to foreign distributors. "Capitol Worldwide is distributed through EMI, so basically how it works is, each arm of EMI gets the option if they want to put it out or not, and no one did," Adkins said. "So we decided to buy our records from the distributor, just like we would if we brought records to our shows to sell them. We sold them to various independent record distributors in Germany."

Without any label backing, and against all odds, the band boarded a plane and set off to Europe to see what kind of response they could muster up. "The very first show we did in Europe, there were 400 kids there," Adkins said. "We had no idea what to expect, and it just went off. The only people who had the records were the people who bought them at the little independent record shops, the ones that picked them up from the distribution companies we had sent them to."

After seeing how well the local audiences were responding to the music, J.E.W. decided to use connections they had made in L.A. to boost their career once again. The band signed onto independent label Big Wheel Recreation and the Japanese label Toys Factory to release a "Best Of" album. "We knew that it would probably be awhile before we made a new album, so we decided to compile all those early seven-inches and splits that we had been on and release them all in one place, to kind of tide over fans until we released a new record," Adkins said.

Still without major financial backing, the band decided to funnel the proceeds from the "Best Of" to complete their tour and record their next full-length album. But recording an album on your own dime can be a costly and quick reminder of how professional the business side of the music industry has to be. "There was very little messing around," stressed Adkins. "We knew what we had to do, and we weren't going to compromise anything on the record,

even if we were going to go into debt to get it perfect—or as good as we possibly could, given our personal physical limitations at the time."

SHOPPING THE RECORD:

Again the gamble paid off and the record was completed, leaving a small amount of funds left over to tour. The next step was to shop the record to labels, to see what kind of deal they could work out for promotion and tour support. "Us putting up the money for our own record kinda gave us all the cards," Adkins said. "The labels needed us more than we needed them. If we didn't get exactly what we were looking for, we could just put it out ourselves. It wasn't that big of a deal for us to do that."

Although the band didn't have a record deal signed yet, a host of radio stations began to play the title track off *Bleed American*, before a record deal and even before the album was released. After shopping the labels and finding many interests, the band made the decision to go with Dreamworks.

"We wanted to make sure when we were looking for labels to find someone good. The first person we met at Dreamworks was the president," Adkins said. "We wanted to make sure, from the very top to the very bottom, that they would be very supportive when things went wrong. They needed to work just as hard as we are willing to work. Capitol was just a fiasco. I'm not bitter about it at all. Granted, our deal with them wasn't great, but it provided us with such a great learning experience. We kind of grew up, seeing how it all worked in the most dysfunctional setting. I couldn't think of a label more dysfunctional than Capitol; I mean, we got to see failure. The mistakes we made became valuable. I guess it was a good decision, because now we can see the things that we did in the past, and see them as wrong."

Bleed American shows off the band's technical abilities, while throwing in enough pop catchiness to round out the songs. With tracks like "Bleed American" and "Sweetness", the band fills out their sound to please

existing fans while recruiting a slew of new listeners.

"I guess if you had to put a general theme on it, it's kind of looking at the things that you've decided to place your worth on—like your goals, figuring out what's really important," Adkins added. The songs weave in and out of melodramatic choruses. In "The Middle," J.E.W. punches out a hard-hitting beat, tempered with Adkins' hopeful "Try your best/try everything you can/don't you worry about what they tell themselves/when you're away/It just takes some time... everything will be all right."

And everything is just fine. Jimmy Eat World jumped the hurdle and landed right in the middle of so many mainstream acts that try to pull off what they are already doing. Jimmy has been doing it longer and better for years—they just had to get over the hurdle. "When I think of myself, the last thing that I would associate myself with is being some sort of big rockstar or a spokesperson for anything," Adkins said. "I think that, more than us getting 'successful,' what's changed is that I've gotten older. Now I'm the older kid that's drinking by the bar and watching all the kids in the caged-off section. There were lots of shows that I tried to go see, but I was too young to even get in. To me, that's what's changed the most."

When the band does get to stop back home for a short while, they are the same old guys going to shows, hanging out with the same group of friends they had in high school, and checking out what local band they can take on the road with them. "As far as other local bands, everywhere I go I always show people other local bands, either by local compilations or whatever," Adkins said. "As much as we can, we always try to swap out the opening bands, try to give people that may be playing small rooms and need a little help to break them a little bit."

Now that Jimmy Eat World is back on the road to support their latest album, things seem to be taking off. In a good-sized article last month, *Rolling Stone* called the song "Bleed American" "the best Nirvana-like tune since Kurt Cobain left the Earth." The *L.A. Times* reveled in the album in its review section, and other top publications are following suit, proving that J.E.W. has what it takes to make the mark.

Jimmy Ate the World, and now they want seconds.

(Jimmy Eat World opened their *Bleed American* tour with locals *Reuben's Accomplice* this month). **ZZ**