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TOP STORY

Sum 41 and Simple Plan talk evolution of their sound

By Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville

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Iconic pop-punk group Sum 41 is on tour more than 20 years after its debut album, “All Killer No Filler.”

Ashley Osborne

Leading up to the recent revival wave of pop-punk nostalgia, millennials were starting second and third jobs, having second and third kids, and seeing their parents as regular people for the first time, but while some weren’t looking, the bands that provided the soundtrack to their angst-ridden teenage years grew up, too.

Ontario’s Sum 41 first saw its dynamic career take off in 2001 with “All Killer No Filler” on the strength of energetic, catchy and irreverent songs like “In Too Deep” and “Fatlip,” the exceedingly goofy lyrics of which most dudes between the ages of 28 and 33 can still summon on command.

More than two decades removed from that time in his life, mild-mannered singer/guitarist Deryck Whibley recalled the life of a 21-year-old given license to seek unending laughs and constant cheap thrills.

“It just seemed that no matter where we went, there wasn’t a dressing room left in good shape once we left it, there wasn’t a hotel room that didn’t get destroyed, somebody going to the hospital for some reason, over and over and over again,” Whibley said. “I don’t think we slept at all back then. It was just kind of this crazy roller coaster of mayhem.”

As Whibley explained, the band’s label executives at Island Def Jam Records got a front-row seat to all their sordid “Jackass” era madness.

“The company knew that we were like this, and we would film all this stuff and show people for fun. We would go to

the office and be like ‘Look what we did.’ There’d be stuff all over the dressing room, a cake stuck to the ceiling,” Whibley said. “The president of the record company said, ‘You need to do this everywhere you go.’ He said, ‘Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to go out there and destroy the world. As long as you get it on videotape, we’ll pay for it.’

“That was our mission, I guess,” Whibley said with a laugh.

Sum 41 diverged from the pop-punk playbook in 2004, morphing into a heavier and larger-in-scope act with the watershed album “Chuck,” inspired in part by a well-documented trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo. While Sum 41 was filming for a documentary for War Child Canada, fighting broke out in cataclysmic fashion, trapping the band for hours before members escaped with a U.N. peacekeeper in a tank.

That album marked the beginning of the band’s musical transition toward a thrashier, melodic hardcore sound.

Outside of their craft, though, the last couple of decades have seen members transition toward milestones like getting married, having kids and mellowing out a little.

“I think for us, some of us carried it on probably a little bit longer than we should have. Half of us were kind of like, ‘This is getting ridiculous and it’s costing too much money,’ “ Whibley said, noting the label didn’t actually pay for most of their damage.

“People’s lives change and priorities change. Some of us wanted to still continue to be in a rock ‘n’ roll band, some of us looked at it as like, ‘Hey, I’m a dad now. I don’t do this stuff anymore.’ “

And there would come plenty of challenges to keep the band’s attention. Whibley battled alcoholism and weathered near-fatal liver damage, later becoming a public advocate for mental health after his wife’s suicide attempt in 2013. Additionally, guitarist Dave Baksh recently conquered cancer.

Sum 41’s “Blame Canada” tour compatriots and fellow pop-punk icons Simple Plan are also composed of a bunch of worldly dads these days, too. The Montreal outfit first burst onto the scene to similarly wild and rapid success in 2002 with its debut album, “No Pads, No Helmets, Just Balls.” The album boasted sugar-coated hits like “I’d Do Anything,” “Addicted” and “Perfect,” which ruled the charts and provided a soundtrack to the life of troubled adolescents everywhere.

With his 6-year-old son playing around in the background, Simple Plan drummer Chuck Comeau spoke to growing within an inherently youthful genre.

“Whether you’re 20 years old or 40 years old, you still are going to feel, the feelings just change,” Comeau explained. “It’s a bit different, but the fundamental deep emotion that you’re feeling is very similar, whether you’re 22 and you break up with your girlfriend and it’s the end of the world, or you’re 42 and you have to deal with divorce.

“The scale is different, and the stakes are different, but at the same time, fundamentally, when you write songs, you just try to convey a very similar kind of honesty. We’re still these kinds of songwriters that want to be open books and deliver whatever emotion that we’re feeling at this stage of our lives.”

Whibley concurred.

“I guess the only one constant is that we’re just honest in the music that we do. I haven’t written a pop-punk song in 16 years because I didn’t want to,” Whibley said, referencing Sum 41’s forthcoming album. “The only reason I’m writing these now is because I thought it could be kind of a fun experiment and I liked the songs. So the songs were written before this sort of pop-punk revival came back. In a way it’s just really lucky timing.”

In fact, both bands are still at it. For Sum 41, it’s the forthcoming double album “Heaven & Hell,” which showcases the lighter and heavier sides of the band’s career arc. For Simple Plan, it’s the already released “Harder Than It Looks,” which also beat the fans to the punch.

“It’s been a good bet,” Comeau said of the album’s timing. “It’s been a good bet to just be ourselves.”

With the genre catching attention again, it’s taken Comeau back.

“It feels like when we first put out our first album, you know, like what’s going to happen?” Comeau said. “Are we going to have a song that’s going to connect, and feel the same excitement, the same curiosity that I used to feel when our first record came out?”

But the new albums aren’t the only “babies” the artists are carefully guiding out into the world anymore, and as Comeau explained, the game changed for him with his son, whose favorite song is the band’s new and atypically anthemic rock song “Iconic.”

“(My son) really motivates me to keep the band going and playing at the highest level. I don’t want him to say ‘Oh, my dad used to be in a band that was popular’ or ‘My dad used to be able to play great shows,’ “ Comeau said. “It’s like you want them to see you at your peak.

“You want him to see and be proud of what we’ve built and of what we do and understand, ‘OK, there’s a reason why he’s going away for two weeks or three weeks or a month at a time, because he’s doing something he loves and he’s successful at it and it’s worth it.’ I think there’s this way higher motivation that has arrived for me since he was born.”

Whibley spoke about his 2-year-old son’s relationship with his music.

“You always hope your kids are gonna think your band’s cool at some point. They’re probably going to grow up thinking you’re cool, then think you’re really not cool, then when they get into their 20s, hopefully they think you’re cool again,” Whibley said with a laugh. “That’s about as far as I go thinking too much about it.”

While Comeau has already seen his son take to his music, Whibley and Comeau have both seen the faces in recent crowds enough to refute the pretentious words of the 2000s punk police. At the time, many declared pop-punk a passing fad that would be dead in five years. That was about 20 years ago now.

“All I know is at our shows, our audiences have looked the same age for 20 years. Every time we play, it’s still teenagers, young people,” Whibley said. “The music is youthful, it’s energetic, it’s fun, it’s happy, and it makes you feel good. We just went through two years of real (expletive). I think that music came back because it’s uplifting and it’s exciting and it’s fun.”

Both bands had to leave the grudges of their youth behind to make the “Blame Canada” tour happen and thereby deliver their fans a slice of that positivity.

Though they're trekking the country together like one big happy Canadian pop-punk family these days, with a stop at Nashville's Marathon Music Works on May 22, there was a time when their bands went back and forth in a bit of rivalry.

"I think it started off on the wrong foot because I was a journalist writer for a local paper in Montreal and I did a review on their first EP. I think I gave it a pretty fair review. It was like a 3.5 out of five," Comeau remembered.

"I wasn't trying to blast them in any way. I was trying to be respectful, but it was in French and I think it was a bit of a lost-in-translation kind of thing where they heard that we somehow trashed them. So the first time we ever played with them, they came out like '(Expletive) Simple Plan.' I was like, 'Whoa, OK.'"

But as old enemies are often wont to do, with time, the two groups eventually met up at a Much Music Awards ceremony, talked it out and found they'd grown out of being mad at each other.

"I think we've always looked at that like, we have to find a way to fix that and just to bury the hatchet and kind of put that in our past," Comeau said. "If you think about all the hits that we play collectively, it's kind of like the pop-punk greatest hits of all time."



Sum 41 - "Fatlip"

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