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SUGARLAND

Twice The Speed of Life

It's no surprise that three successful singer/songwriters with years of experience can make an album filled with solid, intelligent music. But even the members of Sugarland themselves are slightly shocked by how fresh-sounding and unfailingly optimistic the songs they make together are.

Each individual career of this Atlanta-based trio seemed headed in an opposite direction. Jennifer Nettles, a powerhouse singer with some serious twang was working steadily on the local club circuit. Kristen Hall, a singer/songwriter specializing in searing heartache, has two well-received solo albums. Kristian Bush, a local folk/rock hero, is one-half of Billy Pilgrim, a duo with a major record label deal.

Within minutes of getting together, the trio clicked, creating something completely different than anything any of them had done before. The songs are rootsy and lyrically sophisticated, but still catchy and accessible. Somehow these niche artists have found themselves making mass-appeal country music. Four months after getting together, Sugarland played their first gig and were astounded by the audience reaction. By their fourth gig, they were selling out 1000 seat venues. Two weeks later, they signed a contract with Mercury Records. "We were just trying to write stuff that was fun," Bush says, still a bit amazed by the trio's fortunes.

It all began with a phone call. Hall contacted Bush to see if he was interested in writing together. At the time, Bush felt that Billy Pilgrim had become more work than fun. He found himself at a crossroads in his life when his wife became pregnant and his mother died unexpectedly. Hall also at a crossroads had built a name for herself with two albums for High Street/Windham Hill, which were comprised of soul-baring songs that split her open each and every time she performed them. "They were driving me into the ground," she says. "Every night I sang them and every night they kept me in that place, and I just wanted out."

From the start, Bush and Hall felt their creative energies build on each other. Realizing they might be on to something, they figured that they would need a singer. They approached Nettles, a popular local blonde siren with a big, twang-tinged voice combining the power of a Mississippi soul singer and the warmth of a country crooner. As it turns out, she was looking to try something new too.

When the trio first convened in Hall's basement, they began working on "Baby Girl." Just as they seemed to be hitting a groove, Hall disappeared. She returned a few seconds later laughing hysterically in between tears. "She was just so moved," says Nettles. "We connected so well and the sound was so good, it was such a fun sound. There was a moment when we just said, 'Wow.'"

The three of them decided to form a pact. They weren't looking for a club-level career. That's something they all had been enjoying for years. Instead, they opted to dream big from the start. Bush says, "We thought, 'If we're going to do this, let's go all the way. Let's hit it out of the park. We know what we're doing and how to have fun doing it.' We thought, 'Let's go play arenas, let's make a record with 10 singles. Let's do the impossible, it can't hurt to try.'"

Nettles, the lead singer, grew up on Southern gospel while also connecting with the likes of Juice Newton, Rita Coolidge and Linda Ronstandt. Singing from the time she was seven, Nettles developed a commanding stage presence. With big, bluesy delivery, sly wit and infectious energy, she found herself fronting the band Soul Miner's Daughter and later drawing big crowds on the local circuit and at Lillith Fair with her own band.

"We all come from singer/songwriter backgrounds," Nettles, says. "We share some similar influences, but as a whole, we have diverse musical backgrounds. When we come together we complement each other and create an interesting and unique sound."

Hall, who wrote the bulk of the melodic, often B-3 organ-laden story songs that comprise *Twice the Speed of Life*, grew up listening to the great crop of '70s singer/songwriters, including Neil Young, Jackson Browne, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers and The Eagles. "The first two albums that I ever bought with my own money were Alice Cooper's *Killer* and James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James*," she says. As she got older, she wrote her own songs, with no intention of performing them. She found herself in Atlanta working at a recording studio where the Indigo Girls were making their first album. When they heard Hall's songs they encouraged her to perform and even began covering one of her tunes in concert. Finally she succumbed to the pleading and turned her full attention to songwriting and performing.

Bush was schooled on such acclaimed rock heroes as The Police and The Replacements. He joined fellow Georgian Andrew Hyra to form Billy Pilgrim, which ironically has been referred to as the "Indigo Boys," due to their smooth harmony and snappy take of folk music. The duo signed with Atlantic Records, moved to Los Angeles and put out two critically acclaimed albums.

The passion and optimism of the trio courses throughout *Twice The Speed of Life*. Declaring strength without deteriorating into stridency, the songs are a celebration of all that life has in store and finding the silver lining even in the darkest clouds. “Baby Girl,” the first single, serves up a struggling singer who’s “so broke that it ain’t funny.” But she has big dreams and the certainty that she’ll reach them. “Something More” throbs with the dream of breaking away to experience something bigger, deeper and more exciting. The fed up housewife in “Down In Mississippi (Up to No Good)” gets mad that the dirty dishes and clothes are left for her to take care of, but finds relief by grabbing some girlfriends for a guilt-free spree away from home. Rather than looking for an escape, “Small Town Jericho,” details the wonder and beauty of down-home folks and everyday life in a tiny hometown. In “Stand Back Up,” the languorous ballad that closes the album, singer Nettles dares someone to hurt her because no matter how far she’s pushed down, she will always stand back up.

“This has been an exciting process – from writing songs to signing our record deal,” Hall says. “I feel like everything was in preparation for this moment.”