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DUSTIN KENSRUE
STRIPPED TO THE SOUL

GRAPHIC NOVELS

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A TRANSFORMATION AND REVIVAL

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dustin kensrue ▶▶

COMING HOME TO A SOUL EXPOSED
by MEREDITH TURITS



I can't remember the last time I saw a line stretch so far out the door of the Knitting Factory. It's safe to say I spent nearly half of the part of my childhood that actually mattered riding the 1 train to Franklin Street in TriBeCa and trekking up to Leonard Street. Sometimes I was drenched in sweat from subway humidity, or otherwise bundled up to the point where my eyes looked like they were floating in a tangle of scarves. But it was the black banner that always made my heart flutter with a kind of excitement you can only know when you're a 15-year-old about to see your favorite band for the first time. It's like nothing else matters, really; you brush through the door, past the wood-paneled walls, and the intimacy of the New York venue rushes into your veins like an amphetamine.

These memories are at their most vivid looking back on my little ninth-grade self stumbling into Knit for one of my first experiences there. My limbs shook with an unfamiliar anticipation to see Thrice, the band whose love would, for me, be forever unmatched as I cradled *The Illusion of Safety* as if it were a small child. And when Dustin Kensrue, Thrice's frontman and lyricist, delivered the band's songs like sermons – the poetry of my world...well, those are the kind of things that you frame like a photograph in your mind. It'll hang on my five senses forever.

So when that little tingle found its way back to tickling my limbs as Mr. Kensrue took the stage again, this time several years and countless Thrice shows later, I couldn't help but welcome it with the sincerest familiarity. In 2007, as a solo artist on the cusp of his first Equal Vision release, *Please Come Home*, Dustin Kensrue sings a slightly different tune, but holds onto his signature soul. He has packed fewer obscure metaphors into his singer-songwriter folk-rock, but there are still layers of depth and hundreds of fresh perspectives and personal narratives. And he still stands with the fervor to shake amplifiers and touch souls; a moment I was lucky to relive in person. This is life, love, faith and art: Dustin-style.

What kind of freedom and fluidity are you allowed in working as a solo artist that you might not get working in a full-band context?

It's nice not having the democracy to run through kind of. I think there are a lot of cool things that come out of that kind of collaboration, but it's much easier to be like, "Hey, I wrote a song,

here it is," and if I want to record it tomorrow I can because I know how I want it to go. There's definitely a lot of freedom there that's cool. I like working both ways but I've never done it this way. It's like a breath of fresh air.

Did you do any of your recording on the fly, then?
All of it was pretty non-structured and pretty on

the fly. I basically wrote a song and I'd send a rough demo over to my buddy Chris who played drums on the record and that night we'd go and track it, run through it once and record it. It was all very loose and it was a conscious vision to keep it that way. I think it leans towards a more folk, country vibe. Once you put it together too



polished, it kind of loses some of its soul. We just tried to have fun with it. We recorded most of it late at night after Thrice practice, so it was like nine to one in the morning. It was fun.

What individual factor has afforded you the most growth both as a person and a songwriter? Ever?

Whatever's significant to you.

It sounds kind of lame, but time, really. I think it takes time and experience to have enough opportunities to be able to push yourself. I know for me as a musician and a performer, all the experiences I've had working with the same people for eight or nine years and then being able to work with different people through that time, including different producers, different whoever... I think that time really allows you for growth. I see areas where I can be like, "I grew here, I grew here" but I don't think there's like one thing. It's kind of a long progression.

Lyrically, you traverse ground that's not as abstract as usual. How did your thought process differ when writing for *Please Come Home*?

The same with Thrice, I always want the lyrics to match the music in a certain way. Because the stuff feels a little more rural and down to earth, I wanted the lyrics to reflect that and sound natural when they were sung to the music. I think in general, this music comes from more of a storytelling place and I wanted to write more in that vein, too. You listen to it and it tells a story immediately and you don't have to run and get a book that it refers to or something. Then, as those songs over time sink in deeper, you realize there was a deeper meaning that you missed but there's that initial reaction which I think is lost with a rock band. I didn't want to be drowning in all of these weird metaphors when the music is just really stripped down and simple.

So because you're telling all of these stories then, how does it affect you personally having to dip in deeper and reveal more?

I think in general it's a little more naked which is not something that I'm great at. But I have to be a little more open and make that effort because I do think I kind of hide behind a lot of the things the lyrics reflect. It's usually me with a bunch of layers on top, I guess. Once you kind of commit to doing something like that and really putting it out there in an unambiguous way, it's kind of refreshing to be open. When you really sit down and tell someone how you're feeling and go to that place you don't really go and have those conversations, you feel like you're unburdening

yourself in a way.

"Pistol" gets us thinking about family and relationships with other people. Which relationships have been most important and influential in your life?

Definitely my wife, which the song is definitely about. She's kind of my "hard-headed woman" and she's definitely a very strong and amazing and intelligent person. Even when I don't want to be pushed, she's there to push me because it's what I need. It's like a personal trainer. They're pushing you to do stuff and sometimes it hurts, but it's always better for you. She's kind of like that with my soul, I guess. Other than her, definitely my parents. They don't even see all the



II : I HATE HATE POLITICS, BUT I GUESS YOU'VE GOTTA GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY TO GET ANYTHING DONE.



ways that they've made me who I am. They definitely raised me well.

And then of course, your brother, Chase, played release shows with you, too.

Yeah, we actually played "Leno" last night, too. I love my brother and it's just fun to have him come out. There's kind of a big gap in our ages – he's 18 and I'm 26 – so until recently that gap was a lot larger and now it's starting to close a little bit. I can relate to him on an adult-to-adult level, and that's kind of fun. Not having him just be like, "Okay, that's my little spastic brother running around the house," like I can have him be a part of what I'm feeling... it's great.

I understand that literature is often the catalyst for your music and other artistic endeavors. Can you explain the relationship it has with your art?

I think for me the written word is very important. It's something I enjoy and feel is very powerful. I know a lot of people don't like reading, but it's been something I've always loved. It kind of transferred into writing for me, which has mostly been in the form of songs. The main thing is that it's just basically a way of communicating ideas and I love ideas, I love thinking about things and I love being inspired by other peoples' ideas. For me, that's been the biggest inspiration in writing – the books that I read, whether it be a non-fiction thing on an issue I feel is important or just the fiction stuff I read, I'll take images or just little

bits and things. One is straining your intellect and logic, and one is training your imagination to write powerful lyrics that take a little more work. **Then do you see the written word as an easy transition into music or is building the bridge sometimes challenging?**

Well, the interesting thing with lyrics is that it's really different than writing poetry and prose. You're not bound in those senses by other factors. In poetry, if you're writing a sonnet, you have a structure that you need to be bound by. In music, you're not restricted really, except for saying like, "It should be heavy right here, or soft right here" and it's a set thing... When you're writing lyrics, you have to be like, "Is this going to sound okay when I sing it?" or "I can't use this word because there's no way to sing this word without sounding stupid." So in general, you're doing two things at once, trying to make the words sound right and trying to make them sound right being sung. In the new Thrice record, I'm doing things for all four discs. I'm writing a classic English sonnet and putting that to a song. I don't usually write that way where I'm writing to a very strict structure. It'll read as well, if not better, as a poem, and it'll be set to the song, too.

Did you have to do a little digging through Shakespeare or other writers to do some work for it?

I just kind of looked to make sure I was writing the right structure and I looked at a couple of different types of sonnets and settled on the English one and just kinda went for it. It's really fun, though. I love writing with that structure. I'm definitely interested in the future [in] learning more classical poetry structures. I was reading about something, I think in C.S. Lewis – though it's always a 50 percent chance it's Lewis because I read way too much of his stuff – that was kind of a metaphor for people railing against any kind of border. They want everything to be completely free. He's saying that life is really more like a sonnet. You have this structure, but within that structure, you can do whatever you want. The beauty of it is that structure and to make it work right... I like the challenge of making it work. I think it's probably because I'm a bit of a perfectionist with my lyrics and I get kind of frustrated when I have to compromise something for the words to fit with the music. In poetry, you don't have to do that.

Innately, how does your mind interact with the world? Mathematically? Creatively?

It's not mathematically. I'm very big on logic and logic is kind of on the map, but it's kind of a more rudimentary form in a sense. It's not like theoretical. I was good at algebra and stuff because you can write out logic proofs in

algebraic terms, but I think in general I deal with things... actually, I don't know how to answer that question. I can tell you that I internalize everything. I kind of live in my head more than I do in reality so I'm a little out of it sometimes because I'm thinking about things in my head. I guess it's a mix of creatively and logically. It bothers me if things don't make sense.

You've made it clear on several occasions that theology and spirituality play a large role in your life. Can you explain their presence to you and how these passions manifest themselves in your music?

That's a huge part of my life, my beliefs. It's basically impossible for me to keep it out of my music. I never really try to write about anything, and I think on this record some people feel that it's purposely slanted to a more spiritual place, but it's not at all. It just happened to be what came out when I was writing these songs. I think my lyrics always reflect parts of my life and you see that on the Thrice record. With *Vheissu*, it's kind of a more coherent approach to the way that I was thinking whereas something like *Artist in the Ambulance* was definitely more of a lost and questioning place. It really is whatever I happen to be feeling at the time and what I feel works with the music and what naturally comes out.

What personal and world issues are currently most pertinent to you?

Definitely the global poverty that we have in a lot of places, especially Africa. I think those issues are so huge that they scare us a little to even try to deal with it. But the reality is, I think, with some real but not as drastic as you'd think kind of changes, those problems could be helped right away. You know, like fixing certain trade laws and giving more of ourselves, which in reality, such a small percentage of our incomes or our time can go so far in reality, especially related to third world countries where we give one percent of what we make a month and it can feed a village or something. It's crazy. I feel like there's definitely more than we can do. Then also issues with Iraq are on everyone's mind. I don't think there are any easy solutions there. I've been kind of dealing a lot with issues with 9/11 and a lot of unanswered questions from that. I've been reading some of the David

Ray Griffin's books. He's like a retired logician and philosopher. He's written multiple books on the events of 9/11 kind of combining other works and observations and he pulls it together very well. There's one called *9/11 Commission Report: Omissions and Distortions*. That one's pretty comprehensive and heavy, but I think that's an important book to read. There's another



PHOTO: PAM PIFFARD

one that's a little more concise called *Christians, Faith, and the Truth Behind 9/11*, but I really don't agree with a lot of the theology... I feel like it gets in the way with a lot of the larger points of the book. Anyway, I think his best and most concise presentation on 9/11 is in that book. **What effect do they have on both the way you conduct your life and your music?**

Definitely dealing with these issues, some of it is coming out in the new record. I'm still trying to work out what it means to my politics. I mean, I hate *hate* politics, but I guess you've gotta get your hands dirty to get anything done. You just want to wash your hands clean of it but it's the way things are being changed so you've just

gotta participate. But I don't know, the reason I've been looking at the 9/11 thing is because it's basically the most pivotal moment in modern history and so many things that we're dealing with right now are a result of what happened. If we misunderstand what happened, I think we're going to misunderstand what we're doing now. **That's an incredibly powerful notion.**

Definitely.

Well, on a lighter note, I know you're heading off to Australia with Thrice for a few weeks. What else is upcoming on your agenda?

When I come back from Australia, I'm going to finish up some other stuff. [Thrice] is heading out. We're going to do Bamboozle [Fest in New Jersey] and a couple of dates on the East Coast and then probably coming home and mixing the Thrice records. And then I'm going to be going out for a month with my solo stuff in June-ish. Then I'll be coming back and sort of gearing up to release the [Thrice] records.

Who are you mixing the Thrice records with?

I think we're mixing it ourselves. We're pretty much doing everything ourselves.

What are your goals for the future, both musically and otherwise?

I hope to be able to play music for a long time. I love doing it for so many different reasons. It's challenging and fun for me. I feel like I'm making an impact [on] people's lives, and that's always very cool. I'm able to touch more people than most people with a very wide impact. The stories I get from people are just kind of mind-blowing. Things work in ways that you would never expect and it's definitely a blessing. I'm kind of tumbling to give it justice because it's definitely beyond you and [if] you start trying to take credit for it, you'll have skewed view of your place in the universe. □