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The Disciplines: on Virgins, Menace and Norwegians

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Ken Stringfellow has played in bands like REM, Big Star, and The Posies. But now he's helming a band called The Disciplines.

"I liked that the word could connote something scientific and nerdy, and at the same time something sordid and nasty," said Ken.

The Disciplines play scruffy balls-to-the-wall rock – 70s Detroit-style. Oh, and three of the band members are Norwegians still studying for medical and educational qualifications. All fuel to the fire for Ken's punky mix of sarcasm and political riffing on latest album *Virgins of Menace*.

So how does an American, now living in France, form a band with three Norwegians?

"Well, my Norwegian sucks," joked Ken. "Jeg snakke ikke Norsk!"

Ken was approached by the band Briskeby, who had chart success in Norway.

"They looked me up, being fans, and we ended up collaborating on a hit single," explained Ken. "Then they broke up. Just like that."

So Ken formed the Disciplines with three of the band members from Briskeby.

"In many ways, I'm the musical equivalent of academia," said Ken "It's important I publish, but almost no one in the wider world can understand what I do, nor do they even hear it. Thank god for enthusiastic, more successful musicians who scoop me up and give me gigs, right?"

After the critical success of their first album *Smoking Kills* released in 2009, Ken has taken fame and success in his stride.

"Ok, now I think you are just talking crazy. I like it, though," joked Ken, "it makes me sound like Kanye West.

"We sell albums in the thousands, not millions, and that's with a lot of hard work. For us, having a few hundred people at our show is an amazing night. I love touring; it's a great opportunity and a great gift. We've toured around Europe, the US and Canada, and we hope to hit Australia this year. I think we play amazingly well together."

Ken's career had a fairytale beginning. He made a record in a home studio with his best friend from high school, gave the demo copy to a radio station, and had a hit single.

"I want to dispel any myths that it's impossible to do something like that. It *seems* like it should be," said Ken. "At the same time, I've followed up that early success with 20-plus years of hard work."

But the music industry has seen some seismic changes since the arrival of the Internet and social networks.

"It's brought the price down on CDs sold at shows, but the LP prices are up," mused Ken. "I am a born communicator. I'm online all the time. I was doing social networking before the internet was a tear in a baby's eye. Music is the original social network (well, OK, maybe beer was, but they're close)."

Ken is an old hand at touring, having spent four months on the road with REM.

"It was pretty intense. It was REM's 2005 winter tour, which started in Lisbon in January and finished in Australia in April, and took in all of Europe, South Africa, Japan, Hong Kong, New Zealand as well.

"I don't see much negatives except touring in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia in January is a surefire way to get a cold."

The immediacy and spontaneity of the Disciplines' sound comes from writing songs at sound checks.

"We almost never rehearse. We write songs at sound check. If we have an hour or so, we can write a song, and a good song at that. Our stuff is simple but it's not moronic.

"Most of the songs on this album were written in a week of what you could call preproduction rehearsals in the band's hometown of Larvik Norway in the summer of 2009. We started playing them live, so when it came time to record, the songs had been out in the world and had a chance to mature on stage.

"We don't make demos. We might record a live rehearsal version on my laptop but nothing more. To be honest, there isn't any studio polishing. We sound exactly like the record."

It seems Ken isn't content with resting on his laurels. When he isn't writing or touring or making albums, he's mixing.

"I'm mixing records all the time," explained Ken. "On tour, I'm usually with my laptop editing vocals. I'm working on an incredible record now for an artist named Sonja Van Hamel, who is a great musician and singer and brilliant illustrator and designer as well. She's a great friend, too."

The most important aspect to working in music is to do what you love.

"I love what I do, and I don't do anything I don't love," said Ken. "I don't listen to advice, mostly 'cause most people want to put you in what they think your place should be, and it's almost always smaller than the place you're gonna go if you do what you want and believe."

If there's one thing experience has taught Ken it's that you have to work hard to get what you want.

"The D's record is distributed by a distributor in Holland; they can get stock from the German release," began Ken. "So, the records are there but the distributor isn't a label per se. So, I asked if they have a promotion department.

"Yes, they do.

"I asked, would they be able to do some press for this record?"

"No, they said — they have too many titles so they only do active promotion for labels they have exclusive distribution for (not our label), otherwise they'd be overwhelmed.

"So I said, fine — I can pay you to do promotion. This is in an era when people are selling less and less, and I offered them free money.

"No, they said. They don't 'work that way.'"

"Uh, so, you don't want to get PAID for what you do? Hmmm.

"So, I asked if they could send me a list of contacts and I would do the promo myself with the German label. In other words, help them sell records, at no cost to them. It would take them two minutes to draw up a list of contacts. And the guy said: 'We won't share our contacts.'"

"I mean...we're all in this together, right? It's inexplicably stupid attitudes like this that are draining the music biz of talent, money and, evidently, brains. Like, why would I bother helping this douchebag sell my records after that? I'll sell them at shows, and via our website. And guess what? In three years or less, I'll still have a career. He'll be lucky if he has a job cleaning a sno cone machine for the county fair."

If you're not converted to one of the disciplines then you [can listen to the Disciplines' latest album Virgins of Menace for free online](#).

The Disciplines plan to play festivals this summer. Make sure to check out their website for more details.

www.thedisciplines.com

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