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PLUGGED IN: KONGOS

Written by **Mike Duffy** on June 16, 2014

Danny Kongos was on the tour bus with his band Kongos—the current darlings of the alternative airwaves—barreling through Seattle when he abruptly paused midsentence during an interview with Fender.com.

“Whoa, that’s the El Corazon,” he said with a wistful chuckle. “Last time we played there, the alley was covered with beer bottles and piss.”

That was about a year ago, when Kongos were passing through the United States to support their independently released 2012 sophomore album *Lunatic*.

Now, with a certified smash hit in “Come With Me Now” being played on alt radio stations across the nation, bookings on the summer festival circuit and a supporting role on Kings of Leon’s fall tour, things are a little different for the quartet of brothers.

Rolling into the Emerald City this time around for a show at the Neptune called Concerts 4 A Cause benefiting Youth Care, Kongos has developed into a seasoned live act and seem poised to take on the world.

It had already been a long and worldly journey to even get to this point though.

Three of the Kongos boys were born in London – Dylan (bass), Jesse (drums) and Johnny (keyboards, accordion), while Danny came into the world during the family’s eight-year stint in South Africa. By 1996, the family moved to Phoenix, and throughout it all, music remained an important aspect of their lives.

A big part of that was through the clan’s patriarch. John Kongos was a popular recording artist in South Africa in the 1960s. Audiophiles might recognize his folky hits “He’s Gonna Step on You Again” and “Tokoloshe Man,” the latter of which his sons continue to perform on stage.

Their father also had a recording arm in London called Tapestry Studios, where he worked with the likes of Def Leppard, Cat Stevens and Mutt Lange.

As such, it wasn’t hard to build a solid musical framework as each member of Kongos matured, whether that was through their dad’s diverse record collection, or the family’s South African roots.

“Our dad surrounded us with so much music,” said Danny. “His record collection really influenced us, and a lot of that was South African music. The place gets into your blood, for sure. We were largely listening to that. I definitely want to say that being there influenced us, but it’s hard to say exactly why or how.

“There is one DVD we had called *The Guitarists of South Africa*, and it’s just some guy going around filming people who play guitar. You don’t even know their names, but you see all types of styles. That was fascinating.”

Danny, Dylan, Jesse and Johnny all took piano as children, but each gravitated towards different instruments in their teens. That led to several bedroom sessions in which the brothers would record loose demos as they began to build their sound.

Classic Americana like Jackson Browne influenced them, as did reggae and the South African screwed and chopped electronic beats of Kwiato artist Mandoza. Danny cites Jeff Beck as one of his early idols, and there are moments where one can hear tinges of the Beatles, Kings of Leon, or even the Dropkick Murphys on *Lunatic*.

Eventually, Kongos had their first gig – a revelatory 2003 high school talent show where they played two songs– one original and the fittingly Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby.”

“I remember the little things about that night, like packing up the gear and setting up,” Danny said. “Honestly, playing on stage was a shit show. I have no idea what it sounded like, so good thing that was before iPhones were so popular. I do remember that it was our first gig where we said, ‘OK, we’re taking this out of the bedroom, so let’s make it professional.’ There was pressure to make something presentable ... even though it wasn’t.”

In 2007, Kongos put out their debut album. Although it was D-I-Y, things were slightly easier since their father built a home studio and dipped in at times to offer his sage advice.

“There was no hesitation about us being a band,” said Danny. “He never was skeptical, because he’d had success and knew it was fun. He knew it could be a really interesting life, so there was support there. In the studio, he would come down every so often to give us a fresh pair of ears. I think he even sang some backup vocals on some tracks. Because of his experience running a studio in the U.K., that prevented us from reinventing the wheel a few times.”

It wasn’t until they pulled together two seminal tracks – “I’m Only Joking” and “Come With Me Now” – circa 2012, when things really started to accelerate.

“When we did the first record before *Lunatic*, that’s when we were thinking, ‘Oh man do we get real jobs, or do this band thing?’”

The tribal drum beats, gritty guitars, ear-catching accordion and anthemic choruses combined into a recipe that spread like wildfire.

“We were messing around making a couple records and demos, playing gigs,” remembered Danny. “When we did the first record before *Lunatic*, that’s when we were thinking, ‘Oh man do we get real jobs, or do this band thing?’ Obviously, the band was a little more appealing.”

Fortunately, a South African radio station picked up “I’m Only Joking,” which established a presence in their former home country. That led to stints at massive festivals in Johannesburg and Cape Town and star status in their homeland.

And when a DJ named Nerf on Denver’s KTCL began regularly spinning “Come With Me Now,” that was the crack in the floodgate of their adoptive country that Kongos needed.

“Nerf happened to be a pretty influential DJ, and it started getting passed around,” said Danny, noting that Phoenix’s KWSS and Chicago’s WKQX were also early supporters of the band. “When KROQ in L.A. started playing it, that’s when everyone else picked it up.

“The first time we heard the song on the radio in L.A., it felt like that scene you always see in

*“The first time
we heard the
song [Come
With Me Now]”*



old movies. The DJ intros it, and you turn up the radio because you're hearing yourself coming through the speakers."

Soon after, a few labels came calling, most notable Epic and their famed honcho L.A. Reid. As Danny told it, the song-identification app Shazam showed that public interest in "Come With Me Now" was skyrocketing.

"Epic showed consistent interest for months," said Danny. "One of the other labels dropped out when we had a small dip in sales for like a week, and that didn't inspire confidence. In fact, whoever played L.A. Reid the 'Come With Me Now' video, he wanted to sign us then. We really took to the fact that the head of the company had a real musical interest in us."

Since the Epic deal was consummated in early 2014, which coincided with a major-label re-release of *Lunatic*, it's been an admitted whirlwind for Kongos. An appearance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, industry parties, a blessing from *Rolling Stone* and an impending run with Kings of Leon and Young the Giant that will likely fill major amphitheaters is a heady place for a band of brothers not far removed from the homestead.

The Kings of Leon shows might not be their biggest audience ever – the guys had previously opened for Linkin Park in South Africa in front of about 65,000 people a few years back – but it is a far cry from the 800-capacity El Corazon in Seattle.

"There are definitely butterflies, but once you're halfway through a set, those all go away," said a humble Danny. "These will be our biggest audiences in the States, for sure. I think the only show I was more nervous for was *Jimmy Kimmel*, but that Linkin Park one was definitely a big one."

Perhaps it was their musical upbringing as a family unit, or the rock and roll genes bestowed by their father, but it seems that Kongos will be able to handle their quick rise to prominence well.

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