

# LIFE AFTER BEING SIGNED: Hanging out with The Verve Pipe

by Sharon L. Winterbottom

If you're a musician, your biggest dream is to get signed to a major label or to any label for that matter. Life has been great out in Michigan for The Verve Pipe. They recently signed a contract with RCA Records.

I was lucky enough to hang out with them on a few occasions in the last few weeks. Yes, they are that good, (that I would go see them perform three times.) Remember, they were signed...

## Just a little history:

The five members in the band are Donny Brown on drums, Doug Corella keys and percussion, A.J. Dunning lead guitar, Brad Vander Ark on bass, and his brother Brian on lead vocals and guitar.

Brian is pretty much the brain child of the band. All of the songs on their newest album, *Villains*, were written by him. He uses a storytelling style in his songs. This is most evident in "the Freshman." It tells the store of two college guys who had dated the same girl at different points and how they deal with her suicide. If you ever get to listen to it, your heart will be touched. It's my favorite song on the album.

I asked Brad if Brian used life experiences to write, he told me that this was a hypothetical situation. Donny also writes a lot. "Donny Brown's an incredible musician with a superb sense of melody..." Brian says. "Our ideas have really gelled together nicely and have everything to do with who I am as a songwriter" Their music for the most part can be described as pop alternative. I would associate their style with Matthew Sweet and the Beatles.

Doug, the newest member of the band is a recent graduate of Central Michigan State. He now has a BA in music with an emphasis in percussion performance.

In a conversation we had, he asked me about my knowledge in percussion pieces, unfortunately I didn't know as much about the subject as I would have liked. His knowledge in music ranged from classical to rock, giving him a lot of experience in performing. He adds a lot to the music as his keyboard lines and percussion parts are extremely visible on the album and during performance.

As I was watching him during the show I noticed his dramatic use of the percussion instruments. When I asked him about this he said that he tries to make it as fun and interesting as he can, not only for himself but for the performance.

A.J. Dunning is the master behind the guitar. I didn't get to speak to him

very much but watching him play is amazing enough. When he plays his hands don't even move. That's a sign of a great guitarist (I'm sure most of you know that Eric Clapton's nick name is "slowhand").

When I asked him about this, he associated his playing style with Pete Townsend's (of The Who) in that he plays so hard that he often injures his fingers. He is one of the newer members in the band, joining in 1992 after the release of their first album I've suffered a head injury. On the new album, [*Villains*] A.J. collaborated with Brian on the song "Penny is Poisoned." It's a great song with a great hook. All of the songs on the album have great "hook" line melodies (translation= they're catchy tunes.)

Brad, laying down the bass lines, is one of the original members of the band. He and Brian happen to be brothers, Brad being the younger. The two were first in Johnny With an Eye, and later joined Don Brown to form The Verve Pipe.

Brad is a very animated player, using a lot of movement when he is playing a peppy (not to be confused with "poppy") song. In contrast, he is very reserved back stage. But we had some fun making bets and jokes.

I was able to talk to Brad for a while to gain some insight into the band and what it is like to be signed and touring.

## What it's like to be signed:

In my conversation with Brad I asked what it felt like to be signed, he said that of course it was one of the best feelings and experiences because, that's every bands goal.

The band has been given a lot of freedom to do what they want with the production and music. "It's a lot of give and take, we supposedly have the freedom to do what we want..." They chose RCA for this reason. They passed up various offers from other labels because RCA was more interested in what was important. When asked how many CD's were involved, he said "two for sure and three optional beyond that"

Brad also relates "...if you take something you have to give something back. We actually work really well with Brian Malouf our A&R guy. If he's really adamant about something, we'll say -hey we'll do that but then you'll have to let us do this" The band members have a good mind for business and negotiations. They show their professionalism when necessary.

He was totally psyched about the tour. They will be heading out west, to begin their RCA tour after spending

April playing throughout Michigan, "then we get our fuckin' tour bus" As some of you might know when you are unsigned you often pay for your own touring and you end up traveling in a can, whoops I meant van.

The band will be touring with a crew of ten people. This will consist of the five band members: Chris their tour manager, John-sound technician, Boo-technician, Dave-finance, and Marc-stage manager.

Hopefully they will head back our way later in the tour. (rumor= maybe early June... Great Woods)

## How to get signed:

I also was able to speak to Brian Malouf, their "A&R guy." A&R stands for Artist and Repertoire. A&R reps receive hundreds maybe thousands of tapes in a year. And I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this but they don't listen to them all. When speaking to Brian he gave a few pointers on what makes a rep, listen to a demo (sooner):

1. *a buzz*—if there is a buzz around town or anywhere for that matter, reps ears' get "perky"
2. *good recommendation*—if there

is a buzz in the office or if another member/friend in the record industry tells him about the band

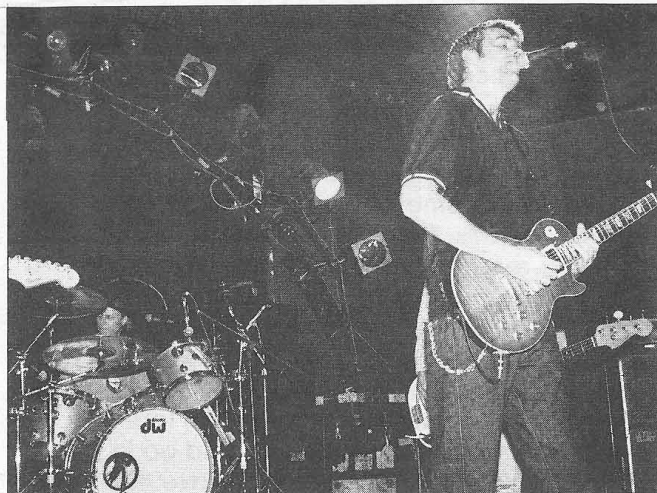
3. *perseverance*—if you are adamant you can get anyone to listen to you
2. *talent*—if you're a great musician/artist your chances are improved
1. *great lyrics and song writing ability*—just change your name to Todd Rundgren or John Lennon.

He looks for a star, a hit song, good players and singers. For the Verve Pipe, it was a call from an old friend. He flew out to Michigan to see them. This was preceded by a pretty good buzz through the industry and a trusted opinion from his old friend. He said this band was a great band to sign because they had already established a good strong following or fan base. Brian has also helped in signing 1000 Mona Lisa's, Hoarse, and Everclear.

Tidbits: Albums out include: (latest release to first release) *Villains*, *Pop Smeat*, and *I've suffered a head Injury*.

*Villains* hit stores on March 26th. "Photograph," the first single, can be heard on WBCN and on WRUC. •

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Sharon Winterbottom and Brian Vander Ark in New York at a recent Verve Pipe show

