

FESTIVE 7TH HEAVEN ACHIEVES SUMMER OF SYNERGY

By Guy Arnston

Richie Hofherr has to be the hardest working rocker in Chicago. Not only does he lead the most popular band in town, **7TH HEAVEN**, but in traditional Chicago fashion, he runs it like a machine. Hofherr's NTD World, which includes a record label that releases the band's CDs and DVDs, plus music publishing, management, recording studio, graphics and web site divisions, has racked up accomplishments too numerous to list, including sales of over 30,000 CDs, a jam-packed web site that averages 800 hits a day, airplay on MTV, an annual cruise ship event, appearances on "The Jenny Jones Show," and music placements in movies and on television.

"It's a team effort," Richie asserts from a couch in his downstairs office in the western suburbs. "We've built a good team of people" that take care of all the details behind the scenes. "I've been blessed with being around a lot of good talented people." During January, the group usually determines the marketing plan for the coming year.

When he's not hunched over his guitar like a mini-Hulk onstage, you can find Hofherr working on Jukebox, a 500-song box set project featuring all original material, set for completion later this month. "I'm re-recording every single song, every single instrument," Richie says nonchalantly.

Along with Hofherr on guitar and keyboards, the band features lead singer Keith Semple on guitar, Nick Cox on guitar and vocals, fellow founder Michael Mooshey on drums, and longtime bassist Mark Kennetz. "Most people think we sound like DEF LEPPARD," Richie says. A touring juggernaut, **7TH HEAVEN** will be playing 24 live shows this month, culminating with a highly coveted gig at Milwaukee's Summerfest June 30. They will perform at 80-plus festivals this summer season.

According to Hofherr, there's one reason above all others to play the festivals. "The number one thing has to be seeing young kids getting into music, absolutely, for me. When I see a little kid who's unjaded, he's not disgruntled, he's not mad at anybody, he's not going through a bad relationship, he's not broke, he doesn't have health issues, he's just a little kid having fun. He's out there and he's unscathed, and he's got a smile on his face. And you see him and he's just getting into the music and he's dancing or he's smiling, I love seeing kids at fests." Another reason? "A big fest stage gives us a bigger playground."

Keith Semple is the obvious focal point onstage, and his ample experience shows, as he amiably engages the crowd to sing along to every song, original or cover. Keith went through the **AMERICAN IDOL** tryouts last summer in Chicago, but was eliminated when it was discovered that he was here on a work visa and not a permanent residency. Keith had actually won the **British Idol** competition, "Pop Stars—The Rivals," back in 2002, and was in America on a Paul McCartney-like "extraordinary talent" work visa. At a recent club show, Semple had the band's fans poised with their drinks in the air, singing along to every word. And it only got crazier during the band's signature "Rock Medley," which features 30 cover songs in 30 minutes and is spotlighted on one of their CDs.

Seven-year **7TH HEAVEN** veteran bassist Kennetz roams the stage, locking in the groove with drummer Mooshey. Meanwhile, guitarists Cox and Hofherr play games with their Dunlop guitar picks, running through up to 1,000 a night as they throw them back and forth, and out into the crowd, laughing all the while. When he placed a recent order for more picks, which the band buys by the carload, Richie was told they had just ordered more picks than **METALLICA**.

Their fans don't really like when the band slows it down for a ballad or love song, urging them to pick up the pace. "And that's unfortunate, because we wouldn't mind showing off that we could sing really good harmonies, or we could play a really good ballad.

"So that's why we have an unplugged version of the band. It's so that we can play a mellow song, or an acoustic version of one of our songs, and it's a slow ballad," Hofherr explains. The "unplugged" version includes Richie, Nick, Keith, and drummer Mooshey's sister Tammy. (lead singer of local favorite **HE SAID/SHE SAID**)

The band's most recent CD release, **U.S.A.-U.K.**, features the album opener "Better This Way," currently the object of a

Hot AC format radio campaign being run by master Chicago radio promoter Jeff McCluskey (call your requests in to **THE MIX 101.9 FM**). The song is another in a long line of melodic rock songs featuring chugging rhythms and anthemic choruses with sparkling group vocals and crunchy guitars written by Hofherr and a coterie of collaborators, including former vocalist Tony DiGiulio, now in **MEN FROM MARZ**.

Richie writes and plays most of the music in his Pro Tools-equipped home studio, leaving the everyday lyrics to others, in this case singer

Semple, a South African native with a sexy Northern Irish brogue who Richie found on MySpace. Like most **7TH HEAVEN** songs, you'll be singing along before the second chorus.

Table tops at **NTD Central** are littered with huge bags of guitar picks, and drumsticks, t-shirts and demo tapes, thousands of demo tapes of songs never completed. The recently celebrated 40-year-old Hofherr is nothing if not prolific, an ever energetic workaholic with a firm grasp on his business and his music.

The phone rings incessantly, as a myriad of projects work their way towards completion: Jukebox, a TV pilot, remastered CD versions of classic Chicago rock bands' albums (**AMETHYST**, **AWOL**, **HAMMERON**, **STRANGE OUTLOOK**, and others), 250 live dates a year, new t-shirt designs, the contest to pick the opening band for the July 30 **BON JOVI** show at Soldier Field (**7TH HEAVEN** won, thanks to the encouragement of a few dozen fans and some savvy internet strategy by Hofherr), a real estate venture, and so much more than this article can hold.

"We've got a lot of synergies going on," says Hofherr. "It's a really good time. I always hope that when you're in a good moment like this, I pray that you can sustain this good run forever."

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