

Suburban band in 7th Heaven with anniversary Bon Jovi gig

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7th Heaven from Chicago's suburbs includes drummer Michael Mooshey, singer Keith Semple, guitarist Nick Cox and guitarist Richard Hofherr. Not pictured: bassist Mark Kennetz. (Al Podgorski/Sun-Times)

How do you celebrate 25 years together as a local rock band?

With a concert at Soldier Field, of course. The members of suburban Chicago's 7th Heaven, a pillar of the regional festival circuit, have managed to pull off that little anniversary party for themselves. They entered a contest through Bon Jovi's Web site, submitting one of their songs ("Better This Way," lead track to the band's latest CD, 2008's "U.S.A.-U.K.") to a vote by fans. About 3.3 million votes later, the top 20 groups from the United States and Canada were scrutinized by the members of Bon Jovi, and 13 were selected to open several stadium dates on the classic rock band's current world tour. 7th Heaven opens Friday's sold-out show.

"In the end, they wanted to look at video and basically answer this question: Can we play in front of this big a crowd at Soldier Field?" said 7th Heaven guitarist Nick Cox during a recent chat with the band. He shrugged. "We've played bigger." "We have enough footage of us before crowds that big for five lifetimes," chimed in lead singer Keith Semple. "We play for 60,000 people at [Naperville's] Ribfest. Once you get to 30,000 or 40,000 people or more, you can't really tell the difference."

Soldier Field, however, is not Ribfest. The 57,000 people expected at Friday's Bon Jovi concert won't be gnawing on charred bones and staring half-heartedly at a band that happens to be onstage just past the funnel cake stand. They'll be suited up and ready for serious, stadium-size rock. And no covers. 7th Heaven has survived for 25 years playing a lot of covers to party crowds. This allows the band to play around 250 shows each year. While they have no shame about the covers side of business, they have concentrated on original music thus far in the 21st century. In fact, the band is almost ready to release a 500-song box set (that's 25 CDs, or about 3 GB of downloads) spanning all 25 years of its original music.

"I don't have that egotistical thing about playing covers," Semple said. "I know a lot of guys working 12-hour days at regular jobs to support their dream, and maybe playing one show a month. We work full-time playing rock 'n' roll. That's all I ever wanted to do."

Semple came a ways to do it, too. A native of South Africa and raised in Northern Ireland (and, on the day we spoke with him, suffering from a stage-induced back injury -- very Bono), he was a 2002 winner of "Popstars," the British version of "American Idol," which landed him a slot in a vocal group called One True Voice and eventually earned him a gold record in the U.K. But dancing in a boy band wasn't his cup of British tea, so when founding 7th Heaven member Richard Hofherr e-mailed him out of the blue, asking him to consider joining his band in the suburbs of Chicago that had just lost its lead singer, Semple took it seriously.

"I wanted to come to America, and I wanted to play rock 'n' roll," Semple said. "This band was already playing to big crowds."

Semple took another shot at L.A.-size fame, though, auditioning in Chicago last year for "American Idol" and winning a golden ticket to compete on this year's season of the Fox show. However, the details of his residency status ran afoul of the show's rules and he wasn't allowed to proceed. He has not yet met fellow suburban resident, winner Lee DeWyze. "I'd rather play for Bon Jovi's crowd than Simon Cowell's, anyway," Semple said.

The members of 7th Heaven hope a half-hour in Soldier Field will give their original songs the exposure outside the Ribfest crowd they've been seeking since Semple joined the band in 2007. "This band does a lot of things right," said guitarist Hofherr. "What we do works. Just look at our schedule and the fact that we don't lose audience each year. We just need the chance to magnify it. The success we have in and around Chicago we should be able to have anywhere." They're not nervous about the gig, either.

"It's a big crowd. We've done this a thousand times," Semple says. "Our music is right up Bon Jovi fans' alley. This'll be fine."