

NIGHTSHIFT

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the thieves

Oxford's California dreamers interviewed inside

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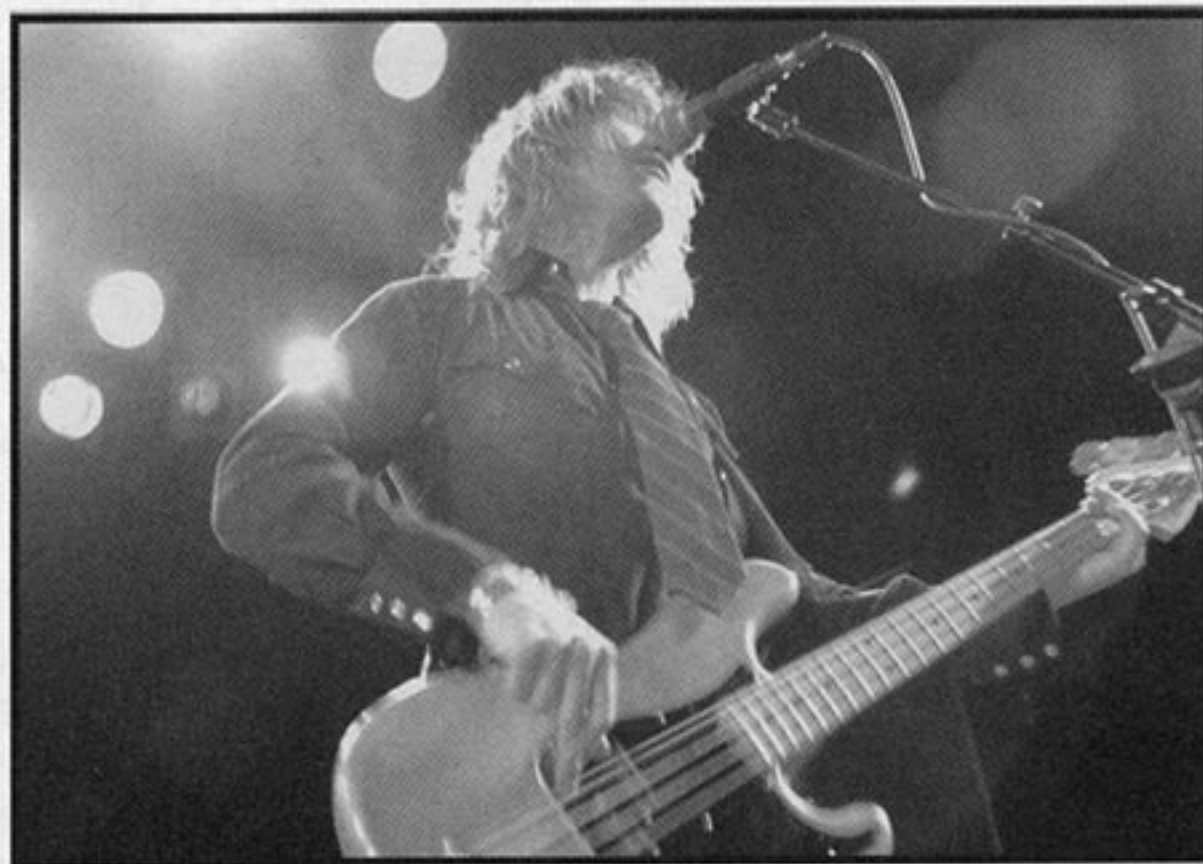
the thieves

MOST YOUNG ROCK BANDS dream of cracking the States. They dream of hanging out on Sunset Strip, playing the Whisky A Go Go, having their own LA apartment and being wined and dined by America's top labels. The Thieves are currently living the dream.

Born and bred in Oxfordshire, brothers Hal and Sam Stokes made their name round these parts as Vade Mecum before being lured across the Atlantic two years ago in pursuit of rock stardom. This month, under their new guise, they release their debut CD, 'The White Line EP', on one of America's hottest new labels, Liquor and Poker.

Late last year Hal and Sam recruited Narco drummer Jamie Dawson into their ranks – a permanent fixture after a succession of temporary stand-ins that was starting to make the band look like Spinal Tap. With the trio now ensconced in their own ranch-style house on the edge of the Angeles National Forest, where they can rehearse at their leisure, a deal with Papa Roach's management company and the new record label behind them, everything looks good for The Thieves. They've had to work at it, though. They've already been through the record label ringer a few times (Hal: "We played showcases for every major record label in Los Angeles, got wined and dined and all that crap. But in LA, they talk and talk and then they deny and then they change their minds and then back again. And then you don't know where you are except you're not where they told you"), and by their own admission had been so in thrall to the idea of a major label deal they were allowing other people to change the band ("We'd constantly get people behind the band who thought we were the best thing since Nirvana, and then they'd try and change us into Nickelback or something"). Signing to Liquor and Poker has given The Thieves both stability and freedom. The band signed the deal the day before they flew back to England for a few gigs, including a homecoming show at the Zodiac. Nightshift talked to Hal, Sam and Jamie the day after they arrived back in Oxford: a band who have come a long way since we first encountered them burning up the stage at The Point.

HOW DIFFERENT IS LIFE IN Los Angeles compared to Oxford,



particularly being in a band?

Sam: "Life is very different. LA is a huge sprawling fast-paced city that feels like it's still being built where as Oxford is a very historic city that feels settled. There's nothing close to the tight-knit music community and scene that Oxford has. It is extremely competitive and totally over-saturated with bands. Once you get through all the bullshit and find where the good places are LA is a great place to live."

Jamie: "I'd totally go along with that. I love how you can be anywhere in Oxford and see someone that you know from a band and chat; in LA bands won't talk because they're scared of the competition. All the venues ask for guaranteed punters and if you don't bring people down they'll charge you. Fuck paying to play!"

Hal: "California has become home for us, we've got friends there, regular hang-outs, cars and phone bills; putting petrol in the car on the first day back in the UK was like learning all over again! I like the optimism and space and lifestyle in California, but hate the lack of awareness, the lack of community and perhaps lack of depth. I didn't like LA when I first went there. Now I'd take both if I could. As for bands, you're much better off here. For starters in America you can't play a gig in a regular club if you're under 21. Yeah, really good for new music! And you get soundchecks in the UK; in America, you get up and just play... which is better in a way I guess because you don't have to sit around for hours waiting to play, and perhaps drinking a little too much."

How long do you see yourselves staying in the States?

Sam: "Well, LA is home for me now

so I see my self there for a long time. We've got visas until March but once you've got them it's usually easier to renew them. Also having the new deal gives us a very legit reason for being there, so hopefully the men in dark suits won't come and get us just yet."

HOW DOES IT FEEL WHEN you come back to Oxford? You were always champions of new local bands round here, how do you see the Oxford scene now?

Sam: "I love coming back and do miss the scene here. A lot of the people that come to our shows here have been coming from the start so they know all our old songs and sing along which is a great feeling. We used to put shows together with loads of local bands and I always loved that. Narco were always a wicked rock'n'roll laugh and they always rock hard. We were last here in March and I saw Shouting Myke play upstairs at the Zodiac. They rocked and the vibe from the crowd was awesome."

Hal: "We still feel that we're an Oxford band and we always introduce ourselves as The Thieves, from Oxford, England. Ideally we'd split our time between here and there. Only summer here though – it's too cold and too bloody grey right now. Oxford does seem smaller and insular but far more aware and less divided than LA. LA is rife with racism and status, which makes the UK seem completely liberal in comparison. I think musically LA can't touch Oxford – it's still reeling from its heyday of big hair bands. And, like London, no one is 'from' LA, they move there. So there is no natural scene, just formulated,

created and hyped ones which die due to the fact they're not real. I think Oxford is very real in terms of the bands it kicks out. New bands are coming through the ranks all the time and picking up where the last lot left off. We always liked to champion the new and young bands, to piss off parents and schools as much as anything else, but also, we were all very lucky when we were growing up and trying to make the scene. My Dad used to drive me and my mates to the shows we'd play; he'd persuade my mates' parents that it was a good thing that we were playing in bands. The shit my mates used to get off everyone for just wanting to rock out was unbelievable so I guess we just wanted to make things easy and more possible for those bands. I also knew that by helping out those bands and helping to feed a scene could only benefit us as well – so yeah we were selfish bastards too! I haven't seen or heard much of the new Oxford heroes. Shouting Myke were the kiddies last time I was here. I want to hear Winnebago Deal; I've read about them but not caught a record yet. What they appear to be is something I like – not just music, but attitude too."

Have you been gigging much around the States?

Sam: "We've toured California quite a bit which has been good fun and really got us tight. We've got to know San Francisco really well and I really love it. It has more of a European feel to it. We're playing in Texas in March which I can't wait for. I just hope they have chicken wire!"

Hal: "I'm always amazed at how good we are live by the time we finish a tour. The hardest thing is changing from a studio or rehearsal vibe into 'the road' vibe – it takes us two or three nights to really get back up to scratch and then we're flying. I think we're best on the road; when we get it right, I don't think there are many bands that come close to what we do. I love touring, the whole thing – hotel, motel, going to the show. I love the fact that each day is a new town, new people, new trouble and new fun to be had... we're good at the touring thing, definitely."

ANYONE WHO HASN'T SEEN or heard The Thieves since they were Vade Mecum might be surprised at the way they've changed musically over the past two years. They still

rock out of course - it's what they do best - but new EP shows a band that have, perhaps paradoxically given their relocation to California, moved away from the hairier rock and roll sounds of their past and embraced a more British sound that takes in everything from Bowie to Supergrass. These elements coupled with the histrionic swagger of U2 and the spiky chart-friendly punk-pop feel of Ash make 'The White Line EP' their strongest and most commercial release yet.

Hal: "Bands change and we've always tried to write songs that weren't just versions of the last ones we'd recorded. We've learnt a lot over the last two years, like the fact that a song is probably great when its basis is not formed around using the most bizarre chords and time structure possible, that a guitar solo doesn't have to operate at 36 notes-a-second and that a double bass pedal doesn't count for two drummers. I think we've really got into what sounds good, as opposed to 'impressive'. We've also got Chris Slade living in our house - he was AC/DC's drummer for the 'Thunderstruck' years. I think we've learnt a lot from his drunken banter over the last year. "We've always had the Bowie records and I don't think that between us there are many bands or players we

don't know about - so our influences are, and always have been, huge. The addition of Jamie on drums brought its own flavour and he really loves fat, solid beats, simple arrangements and classic songs. And that makes us play more solid. So no I don't think it's necessarily a change of listening habits, more of a natural mutation from an aggressive, experimental sound into a more assured and simply better sound. And there was Chris Brown (who produced 'The White Line EP') of course, who is obsessive about relieving a record of its 'impressive/anal' clutter, in favour of hooks and sounds. Apart from that - you are perhaps a little too perceptive: we recorded 'The White Line EP' with Bowie's 'Aladdin Sane' on the desk... But saying that, the song we listened to the most was The Proclaimers' 'Letter from America'! Work that one out."

How did the record deal come about?
Hal: "Liquor and Poker were started by Century Media in America to find real rock bands, I guess a statement against that banal bollocks called nu-metal. They are the coolest label in rock. They seem like a breath of something from the past; the thing you always hear about in 'the good ol' days', you know how it used to be before it all got corporate. We also have a great friend and believer in our

A&R dude, Brandon. He loves the band, not just for the music but the whole vibe and attitude. They've got one of the best rock bands in the world on their roster, The Hellacopters."

MOVING TO LA SOUNDS

very glamorous when you're in a band. Would you recommend it?

Sam: "We relocated because we had big promises from a management label out in LA. So unless something really positive is pulling you away I'd say stay - Oxford has a great music scene. It nurtures new talent and helps you build from the ground up."

Hal: "When I left Oxford I thought everything was 'there' and nothing was 'here'. It's bollocks though: I made the same mistake when I went to London at 17, thinking that's where it was all happening. Oxford has a scene made of musicians, friends and enemies. Big cities don't have that because most people 'there', aren't from 'there'; they've moved there to chase a dream or find the band, or the record label. I think if you leave somewhere like Oxford you find yourself looking back realizing that it's an absolute gem of a city. The weird thing is that most music fans who aren't from Oxford seem to see it. I think nothing is ever what it seems and you've got to take the best

elements from wherever you are and use them to your advantage - I guess I'm saying be what and who you are; moving to LA or London or Oxford or wherever isn't going change you into what it is you think that place is. "In Oxford most of what any band is looking for is already here: some of the best music fans, some great bands, one of the best promoters around in Alan Day; we've played a lot of places and I don't know any promoter who puts on as good a show as Alan. The worst thing that ever happened to Oxford was the closure of The Point: that broke my heart. We were the last band to ever play The Point - we were Spinal Tap at Mac's last ever 'Your Song'. So no, don't leave kiddies, just take more drugs or more holidays.

There's not much chance of The Thieves turning into Spinal Tap for real yet, but for now they're lucky enough to be living rock and roll 24/7. They know, though, that it takes a hell of a lot of hard work and commitment to get where they want to be. At the rate they're going, The Thieves will be stealing the limelight soon enough.

'The White Line EP' is out now. Check out www.thebandofthieves.com for news and gig dates.

