

Brothers on a Mission From God

When five brothers from American Samoa moved to Nashville to break into the Christian music industry, they became an overnight hit. The Katinas have done it without compromising their values or abandoning their radical Christian message.

A DEAFENING ROAR crisscrosses the Thompson-Boling Arena as 22,000 young people erupt in a simultaneous burst of abandoned excitement upon hearing the announcer introduce the next band. Their frenzied reaction is not without good reason.

Taking the stage is The Katinas, a high-energy vocal group of five young brothers, whose aggressive music and Pentecostal flair has ignited this venue in the past. Before them are fans—not mere spectators—shrieking their loyalty. It's obvious this legion of youth knows what's in store for them from this Christian boy band, whose roots in the South Pacific make one wonder how they ever ended up doing a show in this concert hall in the hills of eastern Tennessee.

But it was The Katinas' fourth appearance at the Church of God's annual Winterfest youth festival in Knoxville, Tennessee. Tom Madden, youth ministries coordinator for the denomination, has already booked them for this year's festival.

"They are the real deal," Madden says. "They're not performing. It's a ministry to these guys. After they sing, they stay for worship, and they come back for the altar call. They don't just do the gig and hit the bus."

The Katinas' priority is ministry, and everything else is secondary. Just ask one 16-year-old from Philadelphia. Stricken with a rare blood disease, she confessed to the band that the only thing that gave her hope, soothed her pain and kept her mind on Christ was playing their music.

Some performers race to the bus or dressing rooms after their time on stage. Not the Katinas. Countless teen-agers flock to the band's booth after a concert for a word of encouragement or prayer. And the Katinas say they are gladly there giving it.

Sam Katina, the oldest of the brothers who hail from the island of American Samoa, 2,000 miles south of Hawaii, believes it's important to be available and to be connected spiritually to the events they attend.

"If we're going to a place to be part of a program, we really try to get in there and feel the direction God is going," he says. "It's when we're able to do that, [that] the harvest is richest."

"People come to worship at the altar, even during our fast songs," John adds. "We don't expect them to be touched in that way by certain songs, but when you give your show over to God, He surprises you."

Having acquired a reputation for balancing great talent with greater humility, the Katinas have become a staple at charismatic-Pentecostal youth and church events across the nation. In addition to the Church of God's

Winterfests, the Katinas have been involved in Promise

Keepers, Creation Fest, Amy Grant's Christmas tour and are getting a stream of bookings from pastors, youth leaders and promoters every day.

Still, there are some in the church who cringe at the thought of five young men doing dance steps on the church altar or anywhere else for that matter. The band has even felt the sting of rejection from some Christian radio stations. Their song "Draw Me Close" wasn't given airplay by some station program directors because it never actually mentions Jesus. The song became a hit nonetheless.

Traditional types argue that the band's choreography and pop musical style—mixed with R&B and rap sounds—is too close to that of the hip boy bands that abound in today's pop culture. That's OK with the Katinas, who aren't so caught up in the industry that they compromise the ministry.

Keeping It Real

Traveling 150 days out of the year, the band's schedule now boasts numerous Promise Keepers (PK) events. After the Katinas filled in for an absent artist, PK was so impressed they signed them on for more. Four of the five brothers are married with children, and being godly husbands and fathers is priority one.

"Promise Keepers appeals to us because we see a lack of leadership in the homes," says John, 28, whose wife, Sharee, gave birth to a son last year. "We want to encourage men to step up to the plate and be the leaders, the fathers, the husbands that God has designed for us to be."

“For every adult man in the church there are five or six women, and that’s pretty sad. If men would fulfill their roles, families would be stronger. Being able to impact the entire family is the most important thing about our ministry.”

There is a down side to being a hip Christian band. They speak openly about being asked to tone down their style by those who were uncomfortable with their edgy performances and aggressive beat. As preacher’s kids they’ve learned to respect spiritual authority.

“When we go to a church setting and we’re part of an event and the leader says, ‘I’d like you to do this,’ we’re going to work with them, and we believe that we need to take that posture. But at the same time you can’t please everybody,” John says. “That’s not to say that we’re going to be rebels for Jesus.”

“I think God wants us to be respectful,” Sam adds. “He wants us to recognize the pastor and leadership, but ultimately we answer to God. We’ve never gotten to the point where we totally differed with a leader. We have to be sensitive. Yes, God has given us a certain style of music, but it’s not for everyone.

“We’ve found so much favor when we respect the leadership that brings us to are many times we’ve had to bite our tongues. We’ll look out into an audience full of young people and know what they want, but if the pastor says no choreography, then we don’t do it. We have to respect his word.”

From a family of 12 siblings, the brothers seemed to be destined for careers in music right from the start. Sam, the

oldest at 32, plays keyboards; Joe, 30, plays the drums; James, John's twin, plays bass; and Jesse, 26, the lone bachelor, sings lead vocals along with John.

Their father, Moses, was an organist, and he and his family led the music ministry at their church and at open-air meetings in the marketplace. The Katina patriarch served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam and came home from the war an alcoholic.

"He was very abusive to our family," Sam reveals. "We don't mind sharing that because ultimately, one Wednesday night, he was born again, and our family was healed." Saved and delivered from his addiction in 1971, Moses began to pastor an Assemblies of God church in Samoa eight years later.

"When Dad got saved, he went from one extreme to the other," John says. "He became radical for God like he was once radical for the world. He raised us as more than just his children. He raised us as leaders. Long before this full-time music ministry started for us, whether it was in our youth group or in choir, we felt like leaders.

"Being in a pastor's home, we grew pretty fast spiritually, and praise and worship music just became part of our lives. We were up every morning at 5 a.m. for devotions, and we'd learn a new memory verse every week. Dad and Mom really nurtured us with the Word of God."

Pastor Katina honed the music abilities of his sons, making them practice every day.

"Music was the only thing we were allowed to do," John says of

those early years.

Unbeknownst to their conservative father, the boys snuck in Earth, Wind & Fire albums behind his back—which they say contributes to the urban contemporary sound they possess today. Their mother was busy interceding in prayer for her sons as she watched them grow in talent and stature.

“She was a prayer warrior,” Sam says. “We would get together and sing in the living room, and afterward she would take oil and anoint us and pray: ‘Father, only for Your glory may these boys be used. Only for kingdom purposes.’ We can’t get away from that prayer.”

“She would lay her hands right on our mouths,” John adds. “She would pray for God to sing through us. She asked the Lord to use us in a big way, and that prayer is still bearing fruit.”

In the Valley of Decision In 1984, the Katinas’ mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and in 1987 the family moved to Washington state for her treatment. Yet despite the medication, Siai Katina died in April 1988 with Joe and Sam by her bedside.

“Coping was difficult,” remembers John who, like his brothers, was just a teen-ager at the time. “We had a lot of questions. Why? There were many people who prayed for us, and I believe that’s how we made it through.”

Sam wrote a song in her memory called “The Other Side,” and its lyrics ring with more hope than grief: “On the other side

there's no crying / On the other side we'll be smiling / On the other side we'll be together again / and I'm living for that day."

Although shaken by her death, the brothers stayed in Washington to pursue their musical career—and with great success. Gospel artist BeBe Winans caught wind of the group's talent and offered his managing skills. He later arranged a showcase for the much-touted Clive Davis label, Arista, which quickly signed them in 1993 to a multimillion-dollar contract.

"We were so naive," Sam confesses. "Because of the dollar signs, we thought it had to be God."

"They started sending us songs that lyrically contradicted our faith and what we stood for as far as spiritual and moral values," John says. "We couldn't sing their music."

Arista wanted the brothers to lay low in Nashville, Tennessee, and to stop singing so they wouldn't saturate the market. The label planned to employ a grand marketing strategy after their record was completed in order to bring the Katinas out with a bang. The contract with Arista kept the boys off the stage and gave them plenty of time to think.

"God put us in a position to wake us up," Sam says. "It was a divine thing."

Compromising their faith was something the Katinas were not prepared to do for any amount of money. After much prayer and fasting, the band asked Winans to go to Arista and request that they be released from their contract. A mother's prayer—"only for

Your glory”—was answered when the siblings got out of the eight album, million-dollar mainstream deal.

“Now when we have to make decisions, we go about it in a much godlier way,” Sam says. “We seek godly counsel.”

That godly counsel consists of their manager, Sam Chappell, and their pastor, Rice Brooks, senior pastor of Bethel World Outreach Center in Brentwood, Tennessee.

“These men walk in integrity and accountability,” Brooks says. “They are focused on reaching the youth culture and keeping their commitment to Christ true. They are doing a great job at both.”

Having learned their lesson, the Katinas prayed hard about the next career move, and it was prayer that led them to sign with cutting-edge Christian record label Gotee in 1997.

The marriage of the atypical Christian musicians with the atypical, trend-

setting record label was a triumph. The success of their self-titled debut album, *The Katinas*, along with their contribution to Michael W. Smith’s Exodus project, catapulted the Katinas into the Christian music industry’s limelight, where they continue to bask.

Along the way they’ve performed background vocals or opened concerts with the likes of R. Kelly, BeBe and CeCe Winans, Michael Bolton, Amy Grant and Wynonna Judd—all the while, they say, not compromising their faith and Pentecostal roots.

“We want to be free in the Spirit as we perform, so sometimes we speak in tongues, sometimes we’re quiet, whatever the Spirit is leading us to do,” John says. “We always challenge our crowds to seek the Lord.”

Back in Samoa, their own father makes it a point to call and praise his sons for all they’ve accomplished. That’s quite a change for the dad who was once so strict he wouldn’t allow his sons to go to the prom or play sports because he associated anything that was fun with sin.

Now the brothers see God using their music to bridge generation gaps.

“One of the rewarding things about our ministry is when we’re doing a concert full of mainly young people, and we see a few older folks there,” John says. “While they may not dig the music, they know it’s impacting and ministering to young people so they get behind it. They encourage us.

“I think we’re making strides in that area because of things like Columbine and other issues that young people in our society are dealing with now. Parents are trying to support young ministers like us. It’s great to see that generation appreciate what we’re trying to do for God. That’s really rewarding to parents get it.”

Speaking of getting it, the brothers were a bit nervous about what their dad and other traditional types would think of their loud, progressive, in-your-face kind of music—not to mention their lissome, choreographed and energetic stage performance.

“The first time Dad saw us do our thing, we were in Hawaii at our brother’s church,” Sam recalls. “We were shocked at his response. He was really supportive. He said: ‘Boys, the Spirit of God was here. Whatever tools you have to use to present the gospel, as long as it’s pointing people to Jesus, I’m behind you.’”

“With the society we live in, the packaging has to change,” John adds. “But the message stays the same. No compromise.”

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