



New lineup revitalizes band

Colorado group returns with new live album, tour

BY CLIFF HICKS
Staff Reporter

The Samples are still kicking. This news may surprise followers of the band's turmoil the past two years. It also will come as a breath of fresh air when the band plays Omaha's Ranch Bowl Saturday night in support of its new two-disc live release, "Transmissions from the Sea of Tranquility."

The little band from Boulder, Colo., has had more than its fair share of trouble the past few years. It began when The Samples left their label, What Are Records?

Founded in 1987, the group was on Arista records before going to W.A.R.? At the time, the band consisted of lead singer/guitarist Sean Kelly, bassist Andy Sheldon, drummer Jeep MacNichol and guitarist Charles Hableton.

After seeing the band play a fraternity party, Al Laughlin joined as the keyboardist, bringing the group total to five members.

After releasing only one album on Arista, the band joined W.A.R.?, a new label, in 1992. Hableton soon was lost along the path, and the band became a four-piece outfit again.

It went on to release four albums through W.A.R.?: the "Underwater People" EP, "No Room," "The Last Drag" and "Autopilot."

In 1995, The Samples left W.A.R.? and signed with MCA Records. They went on to record 1996's "Outpost." That was about the time all the problems really started to hit.

After releasing "Outpost," the band went on tour as a three-piece, leaving Laughlin behind to clear up personal and legal matters. MCA decided to send the band on tour with Christian-rock group Jars of Clay.

"Jars of Fiasco," Kelly corrected in a recent telephone interview. "What it was, was the dumbest move management could make. They put us - free-spirited and liberal - against a hardcore Christian audience. It was just a mess, so we said, 'See ya.'"

In the winter of 1996 and spring 1997, the whole thing began to fall apart.

Frustrated with the label's refusal to release a second single off "Outpost" or promote the record at all, The Samples left MCA Records, Kelly said.

Then Laughlin left the band for personal reasons and MacNichol decided to pursue

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SEAN KELLY
singer/guitarist

other musical interests.

It seemed it might be the end for The Samples.

Kelly and Sheldon, the band's primary songwriters, buckled up and tried to put the pieces back together, forming a new lineup. The new members now include guitarist Rob Somers, who played on Kelly's acoustic solo tour in 1996; keyboardist Alex Matson, who knew Somers; and drummer Kenny James, with whom the entire band was familiar.

It all started to make sense again, Kelly said.

"It's been unbelievable. We're doing more encores at the end of the night, selling 50 to 60 CDs at the shows," he said. "We haven't had audiences this psyched in years."

During the first shows with the new lineup, the band recorded "Transmissions from the Sea of Tranquility," its first full-length live recording. The group even went so far as to fill two discs.

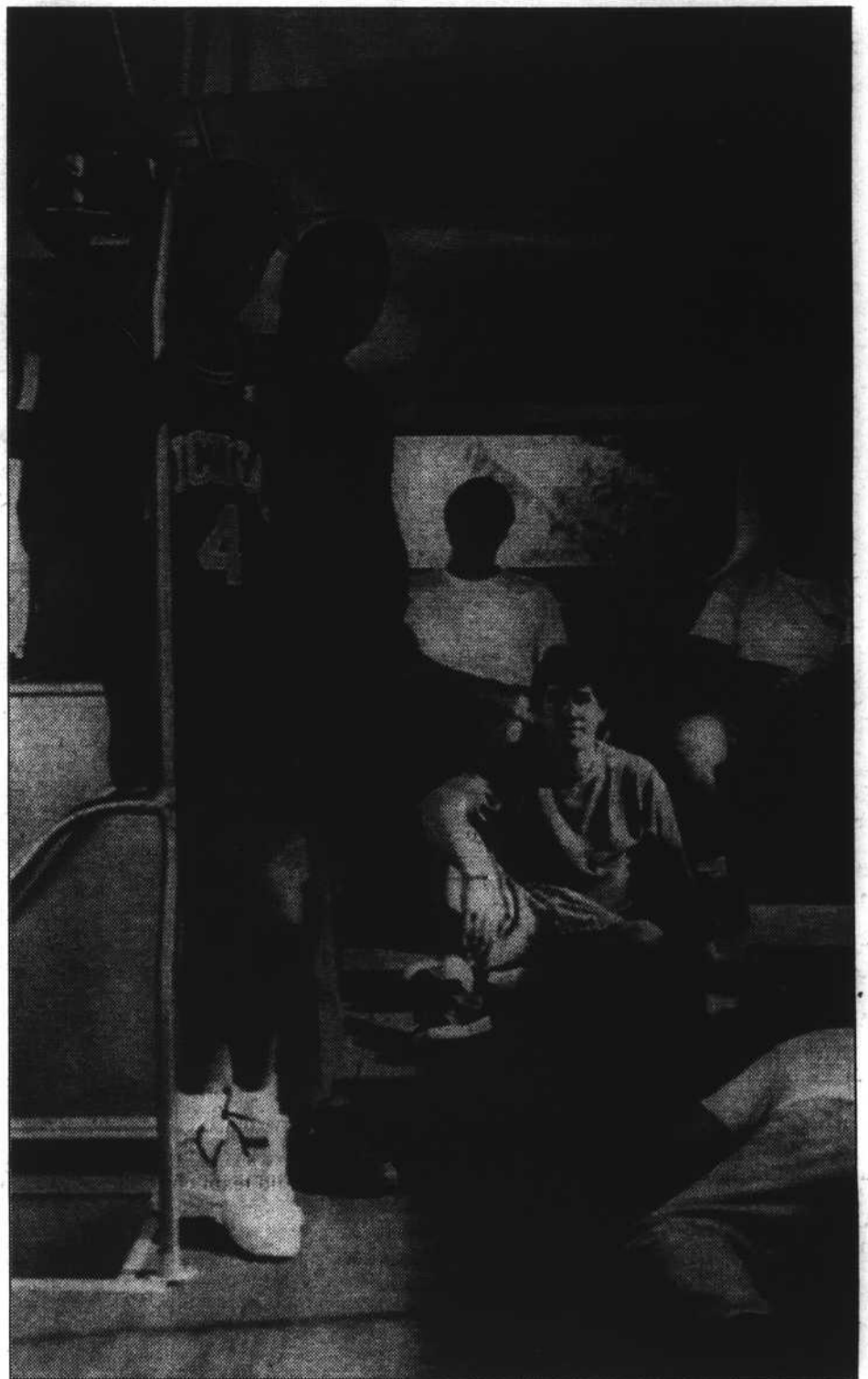
"Everything was done at a sound check or at a show, no matter how it sounds," Kelly said. "We had a mobile truck because we didn't have time for a studio. It was all recorded over four shows."

"Transmissions" also includes songs that have never been released before, including "Flying" and "Prehistoric Bird," and a completely new track, "Sacred Stones."

"Even the old songs feel new because of the new lineup, so I'm not sure I consider them old anymore," Kelly said.

The band plans to head back into the studio in January after its tour wraps up, and Kelly sees no end of the band in sight.

The Samples will take the stage at Omaha's Ranch Bowl, 1600 S. 72nd St., Saturday at 9:15 p.m. Tickets are \$16 in advance and \$17 the day of the show. Call (402) 393-0900 for more information.



REBOUNDED FROM a near breakup, The Samples welcome their cult following to Omaha's Ranch Bowl Saturday.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SAMPLES

The Samples
"Transmissions from the Sea of Tranquility"
What Are Records?
Grade: A+

Long live the Samples.

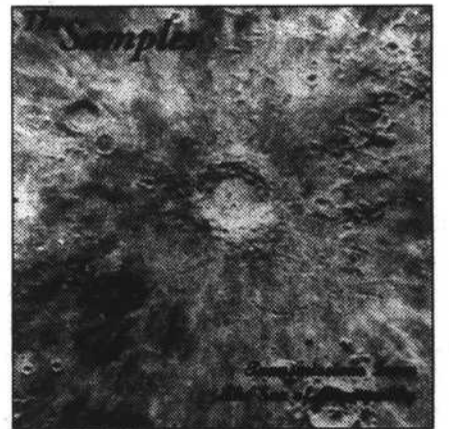
When half the band left this spring, many of us figured it would be the end of the band, but the new lineup goes to show that it's just getting started.

"Transmissions" collects the best performances of four live shows and, by the looks of things, the Samples didn't leave anything out. 2 1/2 hours' worth of blissful music, this double-disc set is one of the best releases of the year, and the best release ever for the band.

The new lineup, especially Rob Somers and his guitar, adds a lot to the band. With Somers, former lone guitarist Sean Kelly is free to focus more on his singing, which brings out his talent even more. Somers' extremely enrapturing guitar work adds a new dimension to the Samples' sound, deepening it. The other new additions are no slackers either, with Alex Matson's lush keyboarding and Kenny James' solid drumming.

All the great Samples songs are here: "The Last Drag," "Nothing Lasts For Long," "As Tears Fall," "Losing End of Distance," "Feel Us Shaking," "Giants," "Still Water" and more.

Unlike a lot of live recordings, "Transmissions" doesn't drop one iota of quality from the band's sound. All the subtle nuances are there, and nothing is buried - Kelly's voice and guitar,



Somers' guitar and vocals, Sheldon's bass and vocals, Matson's keyboards and James' drums.

Don't think the songs are exactly like they appeared on the studio albums, either. The new lineup has really broadened the band's sound, and many of the songs have been reworked. The songs, like the band, have grown. Their sound has been fleshed out, and they still contain the finely wrought lyrics they have always had.

Beyond all of that, some songs on "Transmissions" haven't been available on previous Samples recordings, though some of them have been staples of their live shows for years. Add in the cover of John Lennon's "Watching the Wheels" and the completely new song "Sacred Stones," and you have an essential album for any Samples fan, as well as something that should attract hoards of new fans.

- Cliff Hicks