

Concept pianist

The Scotsman

December 11, 1999 | [Kirsty Knaggs](#)

An army marches on its stomach, and apparently the same is true of bands on tour. Ben Folds is starving. He is alone and hungry in his hotel room in Paris, and my call has interrupted his (failed) attempts to get room service. With a solid afternoon of interviews ahead of him, he fears he won't get a chance to eat before 8pm.

One would think any successful band worth their salt would have a tour manager running around doing this kind of thing for them, but alas no. "Well, I could be the kind of person who hung up on you and went downstairs and figured it out," he laughs, "but I've gotta hang up on someone between now and then if I'm gonna get food, 'cause unless someone just comes by the room and asks me if I'm hungry a"

At this point he breaks off to shout into the corridor - "Anyone out there wanna feed me?" - and comes back despondently to report: "There's no-one out there." I now feel incredibly guilty for depriving him of sustenance, so I offer to call reception after the interview is over and ask them to bring him something, a suggestion which is gratefully received. Dietary needs sorted, we can get down to talking.

For those not in the know, Ben Folds Five are three numerically confused guys from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with a unique line in catchy but intense piano-driven pop. Formed in 1994, they have released three albums to date, and are currently touring Europe to promote their latest album *The Unauthorised Biography of Reinhold Messner*. They will be playing their largest-ever Scottish gig in Glasgow next weekend, and if you have yet to experience their live sound, get thee to the Barrowland and prepare to be blown away. For those unable to make it, consolation is at hand in the form of a limited-edition reissue of the album, featuring a bonus CD of live and rare tracks, recorded during their sell-out tour of Australia.

You could be forgiven for not knowing who Reinhold Messner was. The story is that even the band themselves were unaware of his identity until after they had named the album. It turns out he was the first man to scale Everest without the use of oxygen. I put it to Folds that this is a kind of neat analogy to describe the band's journey from Hicksville to international superstardom, a suggestion which causes much amusement. "It's kinda cool," he laughs, "but that's about the extent of it - it's just kinda cool. I mean everyone loves the mountain analogies: 'climb that mountain' and 'ain't no mountain high enough' - shit like that. But we are just a bunch of middle-class white boys from America too - so, you know, the mountain's not that f***in' steep!"

Self-deprecation aside, the band's success has been extraordinary, with world-wide headlining tours as well as support slots with the likes of Beck, Counting Crows and Neil Young, so what's next on the agenda? "Immediately after the tour we're gonna make another album," reveals Folds. "I feel compelled to make a really good pop album, actually. I feel that right now there's a need for a band that's really good at melody, and good, class kinda pop songs. I think we could nail something like that on the next album." The Parisian atmosphere is obviously affecting him, as he adopts an extremely dodgy French accent to explain further: "I'm really excited to make ah a how do you say? a pop musique."

Hmm. Ben Folds Five do Euro-pop. Now there's a frightening thought. But if they do decide to take this new direction, there's a strong possibility that they'll lose an awful lot of fans. "Well, you know, I expect to lose fans on every album," states Folds, thankfully reverting to his normal Southern drawl. "I mean, I expect to gain some too, but I'm really into chapters. I think that's great. It's good to see how far you can go out on a limb, try different hats on, and find out who you are. I think that we just did that [on Reinhold Messner] and I'm so glad we did; it's my favourite album. An album like that, it's kinda hard to tour, it's hard to write, perform, live with in every way, 'cause it's a stretch, and that's why we won't go to hell as a band; because we stretch." The conversation is abruptly called to a halt as a roadie enters the room and Folds seizes his chance to acquire some food. Earlier, I had asked him if he believed in God, to which he replied, "I'm not really sure."

Now it's a different story. "You know that question about believing in God?" he asks, coming back on the line. "Yes, I believe in God. The hand of God just came in the form of a bearded crewperson to bring me food." Well, Hallelujah! Meanwhile, back at the interview.

One of the many outstanding features of the band's music is the intensely personal content of the lyrics. Does Folds find it cathartic to use his experiences in this way? "I never thought of it that way, but yeah," he says. "I'm not the kind of person who's gonna sit down in a bar and just spill my guts, so it ends up being good for me. You know Brick [from the second album Whatever and Ever Amen] was a big hit in the States, and everyone knew what it was about - it was about me and my girlfriend at 16 years old going to the abortion clinic - and that was a really weird thing for me 'cause I didn't even tell my friends about that. What I realised later was that's not the kind of thing people tend to bring up in bars anyway," he adds, laughing.

Indeed not, but then is it really the kind of thing that audiences want to listen to at a live show either? "Surprisingly, some of the most mature songs are the ones that the younger people like," says Folds. "I don't really know why -except, well, if you think about it,

you're much more of a thinker when you're younger. You get really into yourself. I think that music that's packed with things to think about appeals to them. They're a completely clean slate and they're taking the shit in, and they're taking the words and the subtleties that I intended to put in; they aren't taking these things for granted."

So what's the best environment for listening to this profound music? "You know, that's a really cool question," says Folds. "I feel like a lot of what I write is really visual, and that it should be in a movie, or in the context of a greater story. I'd like to be perched between a set of speakers with the light off if I was really gonna listen to it and get what's inside it." So lights out, and prepare for some of the best stories you've ever heard.

The Ben Folds Five play the Barrowland, Glasgow, next Sunday. i- magazine has three pairs of tickets to give away. See page 46 for details