

# The Bacon Brothers

## White Knuckles

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Perhaps no other band has gotten more mileage out of the element of surprise than the Bacon Brothers. Through countless gigs and five albums—including the new *White Knuckles*—surprising people is something the band has gotten quite good at since forming some 11 years ago. Put simply, at each tour stop, the Bacon Brothers encounter cynical or curious listeners expecting no more than a vanity project. What they encounter instead is a group of guys who can actually play.

“We’ve been chipping away at that awareness, chipping away at the fact that most people think we’re gonna suck,” co-frontman and global film star Kevin Bacon says, reflecting on he and his brother Michael’s first 11 years as a band.

What most don’t realize is that guitarist/vocalist Kevin and his older brother Michael (guitar, vocals, cello) are lifelong musicians, which is of course part of the reason why they’ve become so good at turning heads and tweaking ears, harvesting an ever-growing fanbase along the way.

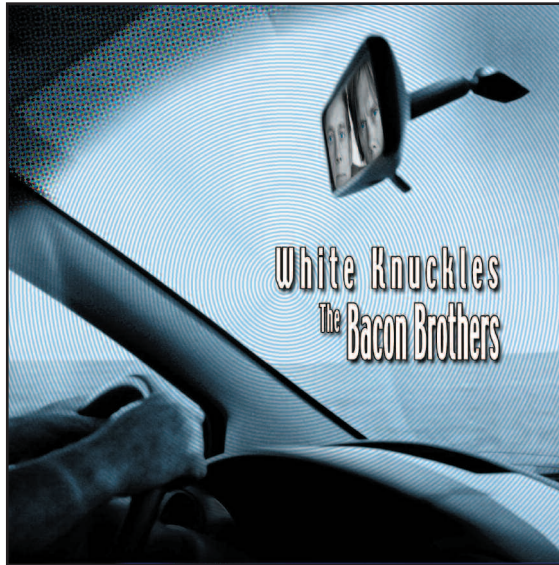
Long before Kevin became a household name with such hit films as *Footloose* and *A Few Good Men*, he was writing songs on his own, and playing percussion in Philadelphia coffeeshouses with his brother and other groups.

Meanwhile, Michael, nine years Kevin’s senior, had already established himself as a professional musician. In the late ‘60s, he and a friend formed the popular, eccentric Philly band *Good News*, whose debut was issued on Columbia, during hitmaker Clive Davis’ reign at the company. In addition, when Kevin was still a teen, Michael had followed the short-lived *Good News* with a solo career in Nashville, where in the mid-’70s he issued two solo releases (*Bringing It Home* and *Love Song Believer*) on the noted Monument label.

“All my heroes were guys with guitars,” Kevin says, remembering his teens. “All my spare change was spent on music. I saw my brother playing out, and moving an audience and I could see how powerful music could be. Around that time I took my first acting class and I fell in love with it, and my life took a different direction.”

Not only was he interested, but big brother Michael saw talent there, as well. “He just seemed to have a feel for it,” says Michael, who gave Kevin his first guitar (a cheap six-string), teaching him the chords to “Hey Jude,” the first song he learned on the instrument. In addition to Michael, Kevin had inspiration from other areas: The father of his best childhood friend owned Philly’s Electric Factory Concerts, which led to a lucky pre-teen Kevin taking in concerts by the likes of Led Zeppelin and Janis Joplin for free.

By the time Kevin was in his teens, Michael had moved back home to Philly, where he was playing local solo gigs, amongst other things, to make the rent. And, occasionally, Kevin would back his older brother. (The cover of the Brothers’ first record, *Forosoco*, shows the Bacon boys together at one such gig in the early ‘70s.)



Ignoring their sizeable age difference, Michael casually began to groom his younger brother, writing chords for Kevin’s words and melodic ideas. The partnership began with a preteen, melancholy effort from Kevin on which he sang “All the world looks lonely through lonely eyes.” “I was a

hopeless romantic,” he says with a chuckle. “I fell in love with somebody and it wasn’t reciprocal.”

As a teen, he hung around a sort of counter-cultural community center in Philly’s Germantown, playing in various outfits, one of which was even called *Footloose*. Michael, meanwhile, had started a family and was pursuing a solo career locally.

In the early ‘80s, as Kevin’s acting career began to blossom with regular soap opera work, the Bacon brothers lived for a brief while in the same Manhattan building, where they would, when time permitted, continue to work on songs together. While Kevin was finding success on *The Guiding Light*, Michael’s musical career had taken a lucrative turn toward film and TV scoring. Starting with small, offbeat projects, he has since gone on to win an Emmy for his work on the 1992 historical film *The Kennedys*, one of many in the renowned American Experience documentary series.

Continuing to occasionally write together throughout the decade, they played only for friends and/or family. Yet they did flirt with taking their collaborations to the next level, putting together a demo for one of Kevin’s lesser-known films, unsuccessfully pitching a tune for one of his TV appearances, and even penning a novelty, roller disco track called “8 Wheel Boogie.”

By the early '90s, they had done demos of some 35 full-band songs, including many confessionals recalling classic singer/songwriters like Crosby, Stills & Nash and James Taylor. Yet the tracks languished. That is, until Kevin's best friend from childhood nudged them to play a proper gig at his club in Philly. On a whim, the guys went for it, and even booked a rehearsal show in Upstate New York. Before that rehearsal show, they appeared on WKZE in Sharon, Conn., to promote the big Philly concert.

"I was just shaking," says Kevin, who also plays harmonica and percussion in the band. "I said, 'Mike, I'm terrified.'" With his knees knocking, he got through the family- and friend-filled show at the Town Crier in Pawling, NY, and the hometown gig. "We had no plans beyond that at all," says Michael. "But after that Kevin got the bug, and the word got around that we weren't really that bad."

While the 1994 shows marked their stage bow, the band didn't make its recorded debut for another three years, with 1997's *Forosoco*, a simple, accessible band effort on which the Brothers put an emphasis on employing as little production as possible. "We were sort of trying to find our way," says Michael. Appropriately, the band returned two years later with a guest-filled album dubbed *Getting There*. As it took the band's songwriting in a darker direction, the guitar-heavy disc found the Brothers gaining more confidence in the studio.

On 2001's *Can't Complain*, the Brothers embraced the ever-growing world of digital recording. Threading loops through the disc, they incorporated Michael's experience with string arrangements, creating their most complex effort to date. Two years later, they documented their stage show with *Live: The No Food Jokes Tour*, captured at Inglewood, New Jersey's John Harms Pavilion.

With their core backing band—drummer/percussionist Frank Vilardi, bassist/guitarist Paul Guzzone and multi-instrumentalist Ira Siegel, augmented by keyboardist/organist Charlie Giordano—the Brothers returned to Bennett Studios for *White Knuckles*, in hopes of creating a classic-sounding album, a studio effort captured in a live music space. Hoping to birth something in the spirit of the Beatles and Buffalo Springfield, the band made its fourth studio effort without any guests, and with minimal overdubs. Recording 15 songs in a week, they flirted with titling the record *Two Before Lunch*, as that was their mission—to cut two songs before lunchtime each day. "It just felt like the right thing for us to do at this time," Kevin says of the band's direction. "It just felt right for us."

The disc, says Michael, is further proof of his little brother's musical abilities. "A lot of times people assume that I write all

the songs," says Michael, "that I arrange them and I stick Kevin up there as kind of a puppet or something. It's absolutely not that way. In fact, he writes probably 60 percent of the songs and I write probably 40 percent. In fact, he doesn't need me to write with anymore. Maybe a long time ago, he did, but he doesn't need it anymore."

"When we started the band," Michael continues, "he was the only nonprofessional musician in the group, but nobody's waiting for him. He's not holding anybody back. He's worked very hard. We both have. I think that since we formed the band, both of our musical skills have gone way, way up. If he weren't my brother, and if he weren't a movie star, he would still be a fantastic partner in this endeavor. The fact that he is both of those things is just all the more.

But I'm not really interested in just the personal relationship. The band is interesting to me in a musical way. The other stuff is just extra, added good things. I wouldn't do it if I felt like I was carrying him. It wouldn't work, it would be really obvious."

While giving the more famous Kevin an outlet for the songs he's been writing and continues to write on movie sets, at home and on the road, the Bacon Brothers has given Michael the best of both worlds. While celebrated, financially secure and accomplished as a composer of film and television scores, he now enjoys the opportunity to hit the road and rock again—something he set aside when starting a family almost 25 years ago.

For his part, Kevin is more than eager to shuffle his busy film schedule around to accommodate a string of Bacon Brothers shows, even if it means he has to bend over backwards to meet all of his commitments. "It's hard just to play them for myself, or my wife," he says of his songs, many of which he sat on for decades. "I love to play, and I love to play live. As a career, there certainly are frustrating elements to it. It's hard trying to get people to listen to your records, trying to get radio, trying to sell records, and write hits. The gigs are always fun, and the hotels suck. It's the same old story, but I still feel that if you have songs inside, it's hard not to want to get 'em out. Basically, I think that's really what it comes down to. And if the songs keep coming, we'll keep playing them."

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