Alumni achieve pop music success

by Dean Hartman
Saying hello

The contemporary Christian rock band After Edmund has been on tour for a month when member Mitch Parks ’04 makes time for an interview. He’s somewhere in Missouri, having played in Kansas the day before and headed for Illinois the next.

The lead vocalist and bassist is joined in the four-man band by fellow alum and guitarist Ben Hosey ’04, drummer Matt McFadden and keyboardist Yates. Fifth member Adam Stanley ’06 recently left the group.

After Edmund’s debut album, “Hello,” was released in February by Slanted Records, a division of Spring Hill Music, a label best known for inspirational and southern gospel names like the Gaithers and Oak Ridge Boys.

The reviews couldn’t have been better. Labeling their unique sound reminiscent of Keane, Oasis and My Chemical Romance, reviewers consistently gave it “top pick” or “highly recommended” status.

“This LaGrange, Georgia-bred quintet comes literally out of nowhere with the modestly titled Hello—an introductory opus that may as well be their seventh,” said CCM magazine. “All five musicians are classically trained, a strength they put to good use on this knockout, accomplished debut.”

Parks appreciates the kudos because he knows they’re hard-earned. The group has been working since its college days to perfect a sound that would attract a record company’s attention.

He recalls vividly his first encounter with current producer Scotty Wilbanks, a meeting arranged through fellow LaGrange grad Ryan Wardell ’03.

“We went up there and sat in his (Wilbanks’) Hummer,” Parks says. “And he listened to our music and told us how bad it was.

“He told us we needed to stop trying to write music for musicians to listen to, but to write music that people can understand.”

So the group went back to the sound board, and the next time they got his ear, he said, “Let’s talk.”

The independent release that followed captured the interest of record labels, and now After Edmund is on tour opening for Building 429, the Gospel Music Association’s 2005 New Artist of the Year.

Living live

“I think I’m conditioned to live in a state of exhaustion now,” Parks says of the rigors of the road. “I got up at 8 in the morning and we worked until 3 a.m.”

Still, he knows the importance of each performance.

“In the post-Napster world, I think...
it’s all about your live show—making sure that folks come out to those live shows and giving it everything you’ve got, leaving it all on the stage,” he says. “That’s how you build a fan base; that’s how you get people’s attention.

“And with what we do in our genre, it’s great to see people respond to the music on a spiritual level … to meet people afterward who say, ‘This song really moved me.’ When you’re on the road, you get to do that every day, which is cool.”

Even after a long day, Parks is grateful for the musical training he received on the Hill.

“People might think that a music degree is only necessary for a career in the classical world, and not in pop music, I couldn’t disagree more.”

He cites his vocal training, technology sessions and composition classes as instrumental to what he does each day.

“I didn’t learn how to write pop music,” he says. “I learned how music works.”

**Warm reception**

Unlike After Edmund, rock band Warm in the Wake isn’t new on the music scene. With two critically acclaimed albums to its credit, the group is preparing to release a third.

But like the Christian rockers, this band also got its start on campus, coming together in 1997. Three of the four members are College alumni: drummer James Taylor ’01, bassist Andy Barker ’01 and keyboardist Dan Barker ’01. Guitarist and vocalist Chris Rowell rounds out the foursome.

They started out as King Lear Jet, a group that had some success placing songs on Fox TV shows like “Felicity” and “Dawson’s Creek.”

Reorganized as Warm in the Wake, the band was touring material from a self-released album when they caught the ear of a producer in Atlanta. The result was “Gold Dust Trail,” released in early 2007.

They followed it later that year with the LP “American Prehistoric,” which was mastered at the famed Abbey Road studios in London. It solidified the group’s Southern psychedelic folk/rock sound and landed it in every record store in the country. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution included the CD on its list of the “Top Five Records of 2007.”

“The band’s hypnotic melodies and floating vocals are spellbinding,” said American Songwriter Magazine of the effort.

And with that warm reception came lots of touring.

“We probably played 150 shows last year,” Taylor says from his home in Atlanta. “Seattle, Montana … we probably went to New York City five times. We toured with Drive-By Truckers and played shows with Band of Horses and Counting Crows.”

**Collaborative energy**

In spite of the long hours and late nights, Taylor still loves performing live.

“We change our set list from night to night, and we have long improvisational moments in the show.”

“Chris Rowell and I have been working together since we were 15. And I’ve known Andy and Dan since my freshman year at LaGrange. Unless you’ve played with somebody for such a length of time, you don’t understand the chemistry that you can have. You can play spontaneously, and they’ll be right there with you.”

The band’s strong ties carry over into its very collaborative approach to songwriting, something the group does almost daily.

“You’ve got to keep the material coming,” Taylor says. “It’s a game of averages: The more you write, the more likely you’ll have some good songs.”

Right now, they’re working on material for a third full-length album that will be released under a new contract.

“You never know what to expect,” he says of the whims of the marketplace. “You hope that you’ll find yourself enjoying some pop favor, but you’ve just got to be happy to make music you’re proud of and stretch yourself artistically—and hope for the press.”

He laments the devaluing of music via the Internet, explaining that it makes it harder to release new material. He and his bandmates all carry additional jobs to help support their families.

“The goal always is to get that major label push behind you,” he says, but then
corrects himself with the more seasoned perspective of a driven musician now melded with family man. “The goal really is to enjoy life and enjoy the moment and enjoy what you’ve got. There’s no shortage of music in my life.”

A day after speaking those words, his first child, Ashlan James Taylor, was born.

Musical exports

The rhythm is catchy and the melodic hooks memorable, but some of the lyrics are tough to understand. Shandi Kennedy ’10 and David Harris ’08 get that response often when playing some of their pop songs.

That would be because they are in Korean.

The duo has had three songs recorded by South Korean pop princess Lee Hyori, known as E.HyoRi (ee-hyour-ee). They are included on her third album, which has sold more than 120,000 copies.

So how did two LaGrange students make the transition to “K pop,” as it’s called?

The connection started through a relationship Harris had built with the dean of Seoul Music Institute, who included one of the duo’s songs on a compilation CD. When E.HyoRi heard it, she quickly asked the pair to produce something for her new record.

They submitted five tracks, and she chose three for inclusion on the project. She even kept many elements of their original work, right down to their background vocals—done in English.

Creating the tracks was a challenge because the producers wanted to sound “American,” but not too edgy.

“We’d send them something American, and they’d come back and say, ‘Well, not that much; we want it a little more Korean,’” Harris recalls.

Fortunately, the co-writers had spent many hours together collaborating on other projects.

It all started when Kennedy happened by the studio while Harris was working on a composition class assignment.

“I was like, ‘Can you sing?’” he says. She could, and the partnership took off from there.

“At first I would sing on songs that David was producing,” Kennedy says. “And then we decided we’d start writing songs together. From there, it was just really addicting.”

Name recognition

Both say it’s hard to explain their Korean success to their peers. Now a graduate music student at NYU, Harris did meet a Korean woman who remembered his name from the CD cover.

“She was about to freak out … like she was meeting a celebrity producer,” he recalls. “It was kind of surreal.”

Despite their success, neither is sure they want to continue in the Korean market.

Harris is currently creating a new album with A7, a group that comprises him and his five brothers. He’s also completed a film score and four tracks for Christian hip hop artist iroCc Williams.

Kennedy performs solo and also has written some songs for a Canadian band.

“It’s about networks and contacts,” she says. “I spend most of my weekends in Atlanta networking and shaking hands, just hoping they might call me when they need something.”

Both are grateful for the musical and life lessons gained in the LaGrange Music Department.

“I remember (Professor of Music) Lee Johnson telling me, ‘You’re gonna get some black eyes, so you’re just gonna have to get back up and heal,’” Harris says.

“You can’t be afraid to fail; you’ve got to jump and flap like crazy and hope you can fly.”

“That’s what I learned in the Music Department: Don’t be afraid to jump off the cliff and believe you can fly.”