

# REPO MEN



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*Too much business and not enough music threatened to kill the spirit of Drivin' n' Cryin', so they went back to where it all began — three guys in a van playing bars.* **by Stephen Pitalo**

In the beginning, this band was slamming the twang and goth back into Southern rock. Kevn Kinney (guitar and vocals), Tim Nielsen (bass/backing vocals), and Jeff Sullivan (drums) developed a following in Atlanta that soon spread throughout the Southern college scene and eventually led to a contract with Island Records. Their debut for Island, *The Whisper Tames the Lion*, quickly took hold, and the follow-up secured their place in the CD collections of every Southeastern Conference boozing hole. Not a night went by where a bunch of drunk college students in Georgia or Louisiana or Alabama weren't singing "Straight to Hell" from the band's *Mystery Road* CD. Then it started getting weird.

The band opened for R.E.M. on the Green tour, then for Soul Asylum. Their 1991 CD *Fly Me Courageous* went gold courtesy of worldwide exposure on MTV. In a flash, they were rock stars — and that meant more producers and interviews and business meetings with no end in sight. This thing called Drivin' n' Cryin' was becoming more about everything that surrounds a rock band, rather than the rock. The problem did not get smaller.

"*Fly Me Courageous* was like going to graduate school without going to college," Kevn says. "We were not prepared to go into that world. We were afraid to say 'no,' so we were saying 'yes' to everything, and when you say 'yes' to everything, you'll get one day off every fifteen, and you'll do every single interview no matter what, and so on...."

Of course, when the follow-up album's hype didn't bring results, everyone started looking at each other funny. Signing to megalabel DGC Records only produced some mellow gold — but no gold sales.

"We were frustrated about not getting this or that," Kevn said. "I was going out of my mind. We were all trying to

escape from this world."

It was time to get the hell away from everything and everyone. With their DGC record nosediving, all members boarded side projects and kept their distance for nearly a year. Drivin' n' Cryin' was far from finished. The music called and they reformed underground.

"We loaded up the van and started playing the bars again under the name Test Pilot," Tim said. "We carried our own stuff, had no manager, put a trailer on the back, and went back to play Birmingham, Augusta, Chattanooga, all those places...we were still under contract with Geffen, and we were carrying our own instruments."

Rededicated, the band had sharpened its show into a deadly weapon. No hard feelings when it comes to the songs from any era of their career; they still play them all. But the garage punk feeling of the new album's tunes can be traced to resurrected songs from Kinney's first band, the Prosecutors. Veteran producer Kosmo Vinyl helped organize the songs into a modern sonic caravan. "These were like paintings that no one had seen," Kevn said, "but they had to mature."

Rivaling the focus of an assassin's rifle scope, the band released an album called *Drivin' n' Cryin'*, containing a song called "Drivin' n' Cryin'." The strength of the CD's raw power landed them the opening slot on the Who's summer tour.

"They were the biggest thing to me," Tim said of their headlining mates. "It's like reliving high school."

"No guitar player is ever going to tell Roger Daltrey what to do — except Pete Townshend," Kevn mused. "That's how I feel about this band. I'll never let anyone argue with me about music except Tim and Jeff. We've come too far."