

The Chemistry

Danny Mitchell, vocals
Thomas Scriven, lead guitar
Tommy Hamilton, rhythm guitar
Jared Valencia, bass, vocals
Justin Shultz, drums

“There’s a warmth and a light – it’s positive; we make music that helps you get through the day,” says Thomas Scriven, lead guitarist for The Chemistry. Of course, that music also happens to charge out of the speakers with an insistence easily as motivational as the countless cups of coffee that help most of us through the day.

Thomas says “writing from the heart” is what gives The Chemistry its power, and there is truly a hyper-emotional quality to singer-lyricist Danny Mitchell’s delivery as he lays himself bare on track after track. Meanwhile, the urgency he conveys about his feelings and the uplift he manages to wring from even the most frustrating uncertainty are met by the galloping rhythms and precision playing that characterizes the new-school punk most of The Chemistry was weaned on.

“When I was 11 I went to a record store and bought the MXPX CD, and from there I bought Green Day’s ‘Dookie’ CD, and from there it was just over – all the Epitaph bands, all the Fat Wreck bands...,” reminisces bassist and band co-founder Jared Valencia. “I like a really aggressive bass tone, and I like [drummer and co-founder] Justin [Shultz] to play hard. I’m influenced by the rhythm of hardcore music, exact timing, a bass run that’s a little distorted; Justin does some double bass.” But Jared quickly points out: “The songs we’re doing have nothing to do with hardcore – it’s completely in the opposite direction.”

Says rhythm guitarist Tommy Hamilton, the newest member of The Chemistry: “When I first played with the band, I absolutely loved the music – I got hooked on it right away. It was pretty aggressive but it was beautiful ... intricate ... I just wanted to be part of it.”

“We did start out with almost a hardcore edge,” attests Justin, “but as we matured as songwriters and as people we realized that the songs that really moved us didn’t sound like that. When we backed off a little bit, that’s when the music began to breathe.”

“We’re not just trying to make noise,” says Thomas. “We want to do something that lives on.”

In fact, the songs comprising The Chemistry’s self-titled debut album (due **April 19, 2005**, on Razor & Tie) – particularly standouts like “She Takes You,” “From Within,” “About You,” “Still Alive” and “Jones” – boast the musicality required to make a song timeless and the thematic depth to elevate it above the mundane. Danny’s lyrics confront the universal, the bedrock of the human condition, and, despite the dangers lurking there, derive a measure of hope.

“She Takes You,” however, is actually a bit of a departure for the band. But, then again, sometimes the human condition is about female trouble. “That song isn’t as deep as some of the others,” Danny points out, “though the situation did really affect me. It’s about one of my best friends, a guy I played in a band with. He met this girl and went completely overboard and then just fell off the face of the earth. We said, ‘Dude, you’re putting way too much into this way too quick.’ We knew she had her own agenda. He ended up quitting the band, and we weren’t friends for, like, a year and a half. Eventually, the girl broke his heart and he got back in touch. And then it happened to another friend of mine. ‘She Takes You’ is us finding humor in the whole thing. It’s got a little more of a groove to it than some of the other tracks, and it’s real catchy, with big, sing-alongable choruses.”

Asked to comment on “From Within,” a more representative song in terms of content, the singer explains: “There was a point where we’d been working so hard, trying to make this dream come true, but it seemed like nothing was changing; it felt like we weren’t getting anywhere. We wanted to be so much more. So we had to look to ourselves and say, ‘Am I gonna give up? Are we gonna let these feelings take us down?’”

When it’s suggested that “About You,” which Thomas and Justin wrote the night before the band went into the studio to record The Chemistry, smacks of desperation, Danny doesn’t deny it. “We were up in Berkeley, away from home, and even though you’re with the band, for me, there was this intense feeling of loneliness. We were in a place where we didn’t know anyone. I felt so distant from everyone. But the song is really about this person coming to visit and anticipating that and being comforted to know someone is out there.”

“Still Alive” is about being “true to your heart,” Danny says, and in this case, true to the music. “There are all these pressures and conflicting advice about how you should sound and what your style should be and what kind of band you are.” Says Jared: “Our songs are so diverse; our writing isn’t confined to a specific genre.” Tommy ventures: “It’s easier to say what we’re not than what we are.” “So,” Danny continues, “we have to constantly protect the truth and meaning of what we’re doing – whatever it is – and not try to please anyone but ourselves.”

The song “Jones” captures in a concrete way Danny’s feelings of doubt and anxiety, the ever-present questioning if the road we’re on is the right one. “We really wanted to get signed,” he recalls, “but when it became an actual possibility, we started wondering, what’s going to happen? Is this going to work out the way we want it to? We had to begin this process of letting go of some things, not compromising the music but acknowledging the sacrifices we were gonna have to make. Ultimately, this whole album is about pushing through uncertainty in all aspects of your life and sacrificing to achieve a goal. It’s about the process, the trials you go through, the different places you get stuck on the journey to your goal.”

The Chemistry's journey began in the Southern California town of Temecula with Justin and Jared, who'd been playing in bands together since they were 13. Not long after high school, Jared branched out and began managing bands as well. He was contacted by a concert promoter in Boise, Idaho, who wanted to put one of Jared's management clients on a compilation he was releasing. The promoter was Thomas Scriven. "I kept in contact with him after that because he was really good at what he did," Jared says. "I thought he was a good guy and I knew he was going somewhere." When Thomas asked Jared if he'd come up to Boise for a while to help him with his label, Jared did not hesitate.

After Jared's return to Temecula, Justin recalls, Jared reached out to him and said: "Let's start something and really make it happen." After auditioning "tons of people" to join them, they recruited Danny, an acquaintance from the local scene, to play guitar. Then Justin, a longtime guitarist (who started out playing piano – at age four), took a new tack. "I had this drum set at my house someone had left there from an old band I was in, and I started tinkering with it," he relates. "I'd play it when the three of us were jamming, and after a while, we just decided I would be the drummer."

It wasn't long before Justin and Jared noticed that Danny had a unique voice and a uniquely passionate delivery and that the singer they had "wasn't too great." Thus Danny started fronting The Chemistry. The band "wrote and wrote and wrote," woodshedding around the clock, and soon it was time to plan a tour. The problem was, they still needed a guitarist to replace Danny, who wanted to devote himself solely to singing. Tommy thinks he got the nod because "Justin liked my attitude." He adds: "I don't know if I was really up to par back then, but it was awesome getting together with these guys because they're so talented and I gotta keep up."

When Jared began setting up a tour for the band, he asked his old pal Thomas if he would book a show for them in Boise. Thomas responded with a slot on a choice bill. "I'd been booking shows for a few years and kept hearing the same type of stuff, but they stood out," he remembers. "This was really fresh and honest, and the songs were there. They blew me away." Jared picks up the thread: "Thomas said if we ever needed a guitar player, we should let him know. When I finally called him and said we were looking for a guitar player, he got on a Greyhound bus and was here three days later." Says Danny: "It was really cool to see someone so adamant about being in our band. He dropped everything." Jared confides: "Knowing Thomas as well as I do, I wasn't surprised."

"I always wanted to be in a band," Thomas says. "So when I was a kid, my parents bought me a 12-string acoustic guitar, but it only had six strings. They didn't realize it. They bought it at a pawn shop. I learned some of the basic chord structures, and I was kind of playing around with it, but I wasn't that serious. Then I went to see Third Eye Blind and it totally changed my life. After that, all I wanted to do was play. I played the guitar six hours a day. I slept with it. I was so inspired by Kevin Cadogan's playing. He used all these different tunings – you could never figure out what the heck he was doing, but everything he did was so cool. He had so much charisma and character on the guitar."

Thomas was such a fan of Cadogan's that he continued to follow his career after the guitarist left Third Eye Blind. He even called Cadogan's manager and opened a dialogue with him. Thomas and the manager started talking about the possibility of Cadogan producing some tracks for The Chemistry. "I was pulling weeds in Danny's backyard – his dad was paying us to clear it – and my cell phone rang," Thomas reports. "It was Kevin. I was, like, 'Oh my God!'"

Not only did Kevin Cadogan produce The Chemistry; he also let the band live at his house near Berkeley during the sessions. "We stayed with Kevin for six weeks," Danny informs. "We were way up in the hills in the forest. You could see all the way across San Francisco Bay to the Golden Gate Bridge." Kevin also arranged for them to record at The Plant, in Sausalito, where some of rock 'n' roll's greatest records have been made. "We tracked in the same room where The Dave Matthews Band records," Thomas notes. "It was insane. We were really spoiled up there."

"It was a learning process for me," Danny says of the recording, "because we all have very strong opinions. We all contribute to the songwriting, and we wanted to make sure we all were heard in the studio. There was a lot of give and take. But Kevin made it go really smoothly because with him, it felt like we were working with a friend." Thomas concurs: "Kevin provided incredibly good energy in the studio. Aside from helping us get tones and stuff like that, he was obviously so stoked about the project, which gave us a lot of confidence."

That confidence enabled the band to fully explore the more-than-the-sum-of-its parts chemistry that inspired its name. "Our personalities and our strengths as musicians are so different," says Danny, "but this group of people is exactly right. It's our differences that make it work."

"The way I look at it," Thomas posits, "there are a few things you can do to live on after your death. One is having a family, and the other is music. As much as I love playing shows, I think it's those creative moments in the studio that will last. As far as the material and our collaboration, I believe this is the best possible record we could have made."

Danny reflects: "You can't ever really know where you're going to end up. I guess you just have to believe in what you're doing and be prepared for anything. But we feel we're in the right place now, and we're totally up for whatever comes next."

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