

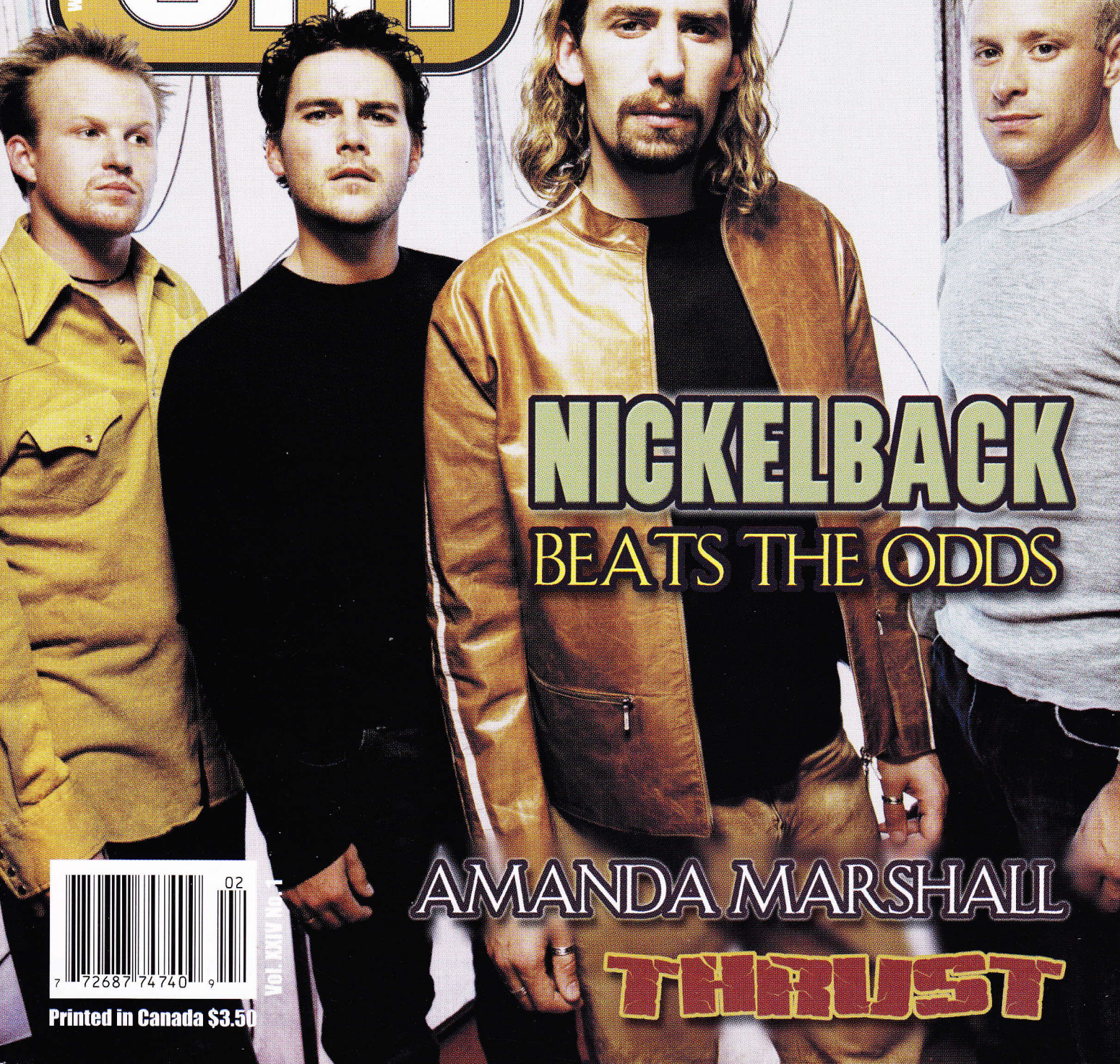
CANADIAN  
MUSICIAN

MUSIC EDUCATION 2002

Are You Getting The Right Education?  
How To Pick What Works For You

www.canadianmusician.com

CMT



NICKELBACK  
BEATS THE ODDS

AMANDA MARSHALL

THRUST



Printed in Canada \$3.50

Vol. XXIV No. 1



# NIC





# NICKELBACK

by Jim Kelly

Every Canadian musician would like to win a Juno Award. But nobody wants to win the Juno for Best New Group. That may seem odd until one considers that history has not been kind to those who have had this particular trophy come into their possession. Not that I mean to conjure up something from an episode of *Relic Hunter* or *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, but it's widely known that the Best New Group award carries a curse. It is known as the Kiss Of Death Award, after the fact that more than a few of its recipients ended up either disbanding or at least withering on the music industry vine (see: The Killjoys, The Waltons, Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra), rather than maturing into vintage acts.

But Vancouver's Nickelback has a history too, and theirs is a history of doing things their own way, bucking the system, and succeeding on the strength of their own initiative and drive. So when they won the accursed trophy last year, one had to hope that if any band could evade its fated spell, it was these west coast hard rockers.

"It hasn't turned out to be the kiss of death. It might have been the blessing in disguise," says the band's lead singer and guitarist Chad Kroeger with a laugh. "It was almost like the moment we won that Juno, things just kind of turned around for us."

Maybe the name Nickelback is somehow the karmic equivalent of a lucky coin?

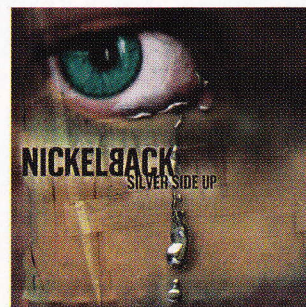
Following the release of an EP and an full-length indie CD, the band – originally formed in the small town of Hanna, Alberta, and consisting of Kroeger, his brother Mike on bass, lead guitarist Ryan Peake and drummer Ryan Vekedal – recorded their second full-length, *The State*, independently and released it in January of 1999. With the band handling all their own booking, promotion, marketing and distribution, the single "Leader Of Men" went Top 20 at rock radio in Canada. After signing to EMI Music Canada and to New York-based Roadrunner Records internationally, the album was re-released and "Leader Of Men" went Top 10 on the US rock charts, and stayed their for 13 weeks.

When last we spoke to Nickelback in the summer of 2000, they were in the midst of touring North America, riding the wake of *The State's* success. Things were looking up for the band at that time. And things have gone up even more since then – *Silver Side Up*, to be exact. The title of their second major label release might even be somewhat modest, or at least metallurgically inaccurate, considering it has gone platinum in the United States (sales in excess of 1 million) and double-platinum in Canada (sales over 200,000), and is performing extremely well in several other countries around the world.

*Silver Side Up* debuted in Canada at #1, selling over 42,000 copies its first week, while in the US, the album entered the *Billboard* charts at #2, selling over 177,000 copies. The ubiquitous single "How You Remind Me" hit #1 in both countries. This marks only the second time in history that a Canadian band has held the #1 position on the rock charts on both sides of the border simultaneously. The first band to do that was The Guess Who in 1970 with "American Woman".

When we spoke to lead singer and guitarist Chad Kroeger in late October, the band had just returned from a very successful headlining tour in Australia and was preparing to launch a US campaign, starting with a show in Seattle, which is where we caught up to them on the afternoon before the show. They were in the midst of testing their new lighting rig, which was to provide a new, snazzy light show for their concerts. Success has brought its rewards.

"This is the first night with all this new stuff," says Kroeger. "We got in-ear monitors, which are brand new for us, and we got this huge light show that we're travelling with now, so we're getting all the lighting cues for all the songs. It's turning into quite the crazy little rock 'n' roll show down here."



Photos by Daniel Moss



# NICKELBACK

What else can you do when you've got fans to please? And those fans will be showing up in much greater numbers now than they did the last time the band toured the States. But it's good to know that all that hard work has started to pay off in a big way.

"I think probably in the first 15 minutes we outsold *The State* with *Silver Side Up*," Kroeger says. "I mean, it just felt like we were really flogging that album for soooo long, and just trying to make fans with it as fast as we could. I guess now we know what we were doing all that flogging for, and all that fan-base building. We sort of laid the carpet for this one."

After the success of a major label debut, many bands feel quite a bit of pressure going in to record the follow-up. Often, the second offering just doesn't live up to its well-received predecessor. The dreaded Sophomore Slump. No pressure for the boys in Nickelback, though. In fact, they were relishing the opportunity to get to work.

"I think we were almost really excited," explains Kroeger. "It wasn't like 'Oh my god, we gotta do better than what we did with *The State*; it was more like we couldn't wait to get in there and record a new album, and do it with someone else's money, take our time, and hire great people."

*Silver Side Up* was recorded at Greenhouse studios in Vancouver (where *The State* had been recorded), with producer Rick Parashar (Pearl Jam, Temple Of The Dog) and engineer Joey Moi, who had worked with the band going back to some of their pre-*State* demos. Tracking took a speedy five weeks, and then the songs were mixed at The Armoury by Randy Staub, whose credits have included U2 and Metallica. Having a bigger budget this time around made a big difference for the band.

"Last time we spent \$30,000 of our own money on it," says Kroeger. "We literally sold that album to the record company. This was an actual recording fund, where we got to go and spend a lot. For us, to sit in a studio and record for five weeks was like a lifetime. We got Randy Staub to mix it, which was an absolute pleasure. We went to The Armoury and mixed it there, and we were very, very happy with the way it sounded. We got George Marino to master it. We put everybody on the team that we wanted on the team."

The bigger recording budget also meant that the band could indulge in some additional resources in the studio. They brought in some outboard gear, some extra tube compressors and what Kroeger calls "an absolutely beefy, immense ProTools system" belonging to Parashar, that they brought in from Seattle. "It just sort of turned that studio into everything you needed it to be," Kroeger says.

In addition to the ProTools system, Kroeger was impressed with what Parashar was able to contribute in his role as producer. He was equally impressed with what Parashar didn't contribute.

"Rick knows when to not produce, and I think a lot of producers don't have that skill," Kroeger offers. "Any spot that might be just fine the way it is, a lot of producers will over-produce. He really didn't touch 'How You Remind Me' at all, because we were all in there, and the ideas started flying around, and he just sat there and took it all in, and we looked back at him and he said, 'sounds good to me.' I was very impressed with the fact that he didn't try and mess with it."

Kroeger himself has done some producing for other bands, and has in fact started his own production company for outside projects. One of the bands he has been



Ryan Peake

Ryan Vekedal

Mike Kroeger

Chad Kroeger

**Ryan Vekedal:** Uses Ayotte Drums, Tama hardware, Zildjian cymbals and Vater drumsticks.

**Ryan Peake:** Uses Mesa Boogie Triple Rectifier guitar heads, Mesa Boogie cabs, Marshall cabs, Fender guitars, Gibson guitars, Ernie Ball Strings, Fender Twin Reverb amp and EMG Pickups.

**Mike Kroeger:** Uses Mesa Boogie head and cabs, Warwick basses and Ernie Ball strings.

**Chad Kroeger:** Uses Mesa Boogie Triple Rectifier; Mesa and Marshall cabs; Paul Reid Smith guitars; Ernie Ball strings; Fender Twin Reverb amp and EMG Pickups.

## GEAR LIST



in the studio with is Default, the fellow Vancouverites who are currently on tour with Nickelback. I ask Kroeger if his experience producing other bands was brought to bear during the recording of the new album.

"Absolutely. I've learned so many things just taking other bands in the studio. I'm sort of applying them to ourselves as well," he says. "Every different band I go in with, I'll learn some other trick, like 'Wow, I never knew we could get that sound doing this,' or 'It sounds really good when we try layering these two things together,' or all the different things that we can record backwards that sound great. It's just one thing after another. I absolutely love being in the studio. It's just a ton of fun."

With that kind of enthusiasm and drive, I wonder why Kroeger hasn't tried his hand at producing his own band. Any future plans to take over behind the board?

"I would like to, but I don't know if anybody would trust me that much," he says with a chuckle. "My band members would just be like, 'I don't think so, dude.'"

One thing the band members do agree on, is that it's much better to do their writing before they enter the studio. Generally they prefer to write songs at home during their time off, or maybe in pre-production, rather than sitting in a studio where they pay by the hour and through the nose. The songs "Too Bad" and "How You Remind Me" were written in pre-production, literally days before the band went into the studio. But many of the songs had been written far in advance. They were able to benefit from the fact that they had been playing quite a few of the songs on *Silver Side Up* for a year or so on the road before they ever went into the studio. All that road testing meant that the band was able to make sure the songs sounded exactly how they wanted them to sound when they finally got around to laying them down on tape [so to speak].

Their approach to recording this album tended to be very workmanlike, starting with the drums-bass foundation, and then adding everything else on top. Pretty standard stuff. "Just like building a house," says Kroeger. "We don't really go in and jam stuff up."

There was at least one notable exception, however, in the case of the song "Good Times Gone", where Big Wreck's Ian Thornley popped into the studio to add some of his exceptional guitar playing. Engineer Joey Moi picks up the tale of that taping.

"That one was done really in sort of a live, vibe-y style of recording," says Moi. "We did the drums and the bass in one take. It was a very collective band effort. When the whole beds went down, a lot of it was kept. A lot of the stuff Ian did live when we were tracking the drums was kept as well. It was pretty cool."

"He laid down all this fantastic slide," says Kroeger. "We let him do three or four passes, one with an acoustic and then a couple of different takes with slide guitar, and it was just phenomenal."

Nickelback had toured with Big Wreck about three years ago, and from that experience, they became one of Kroeger's favourite bands. They kept bumping into each other at shows, and the two bands played together at New Year's 2000 with KISS in Vancouver. When Kroeger heard that Thornley might be in the city shooting a video, he decided to try to get in touch.

"I called my manager and said, 'Hey, can you see if we can get Ian on the phone, and see if he wants to come down and play some slide? We'll fly him over if we have to,'" Kroeger recounts. "He called me back the next day and said, 'Ian just happens to be in town, and he'll be there at 8 o'clock. Have a guitar ready for him that's got really high action and a glass slide.' And we're like, 'Okay, no problem!' And then the boys showed up and he laid down some tracks and then we went and partied."

According to engineer Moi, with Rick Parashar producing, there was a lot of room for experimenting and trying different combinations of sounds and various configurations of gear. One of the techniques that Moi liked to use involved changing up all the instruments from one part of a song into another.

"When we recorded drums, we would record a completely different drum kit in the verses and have a big rock kit in the choruses," Moi explains. "Rick was really into us trying to come up with some unique tones for the record, so he gave a lot of way for us to do some experimenting. We got to try lots of stuff."

Some of the recording techniques provided them with some very interesting results.

"We took this new technique where we would lay down the rhythm tracks, and get them sounding exactly how we wanted them," says Kroeger. "Then we would take the Big Muff pedal, and we would play, like, a single note inside a chord, and just lay down the exact same rhythm part just using that one note. Then go over top of that and use a fifth above that, and just wind up layering all of these different tones instead of just playing the chord by itself, where sometimes the notes sort of get lost. [So we would be] individually playing each note in the chord and going through the whole progression and playing like that with heavy distortion on it, and it winds up giving you this very, very thick guitar sound."

Another innovative technique they used was something that came out of Moi's own bag of tricks. The engineer didn't seem to want to divulge this particular method of recording drums, but Kroeger was more than willing to spill the beans.

"He takes this NS-10 speaker, and he actually turns that into the diaphragm of a microphone," says the singer, "and he'll put that just back from the whole kit, kind of closer to the floor, and it produces this lo-fi, distorted drum sound that is just phenomenal," he enthuses, "and you can mix that in with your room sound, and it just sounds fantastic."

Along with these nifty recording tricks, Kroeger also learned quite a lot about the use of dynamics in the recording process and how it can enhance the delivery of a song.

"Let's say you've got your left and right guitar tracks, and they're doubled going through the verses – you definitely want to build on top of that and layer more things when you get to your choruses," he says, "just to bring it up to another level, instead of just thinking that the song itself will take the chorus into the chorus – layering more things on top of the chorus, like more guitar tracks and melody tracks. I always thought that if you went into the chorus, everybody would know it's the chorus, and that would be great, but when you really lift it there sonically, it helps with the process."

Other than the sounds they got in the studio, one of the other most noticeable things about the songs on *Silver Side Up* is that Kroeger's lyrics appear to be much more personal and more direct than previously. I asked him what may have prompted him to change his approach to lyric writing. There's a full pause before he answers, and when he does, he's speaking slower and quieter.

"I don't know. I honestly couldn't tell you what prompted that. I don't even know if it was a conscious decision. I think I just had some shit I needed to get off my chest, and this was an opportunity for me to do that," he says, starting to warm up to the ideas and speaking faster, "and instead of doing it in a therapist's office, I decided to tell my problems to the world. It's an easy way to make your problems go away, because as soon as everybody knows about your problems, it's like, okay, no problem."

Kroeger has made no secret in the past that one of the things that has bothered him and the other guys in the band, was the way that large-scale acceptance at home in Canada came about for them only after they had made a big splash in the US. Unfortunately, they're not the first band to have experienced this particularly Canadian phenomenon.

"I'm not holding a grudge by any means," Kroeger says. "It was just sort of frustrating to have to go down to America to really prove ourselves, because I think a lot of record companies in Canada and a lot of radio stations just thought that we sounded too American, and we just didn't have, I guess, a typical Canadian sound. Maybe that's why we did so well in America. But it kind of hurt our feelings to know that we really had to go down and prove ourselves in America to validate who we were to the Canadian business. Not to Canadian fans at all – the Canadian fans have always been there for us. But just certain radio stations that never jumped on board, that we always had to fight tooth and nail with to have them help us. And MuchMusic was never there for us, because we kept giving them videos – I mean, not necessarily that it was their fault, because we weren't really giving them five-star videos or anything like that – but we just weren't feeling the love."

"But that's well in the past!" trumpets the man with the Juno Award on his shelf, the singer for the band that turned its cheek to the Kiss Of Death, the band that is now ready to return the Kiss Of Life to fans all over America.

*Jim Kelly is a Toronto-based freelance writer.*