



NEWSDAY PHOTO / BILL DAVIS

The Lions' main men: Saen Fitzgerald, left, Daniel Nigro, Cliff Sarcona and Julio Tavarez take a break from rehearsing.

A roaring success

BY RAFAEL GUZMÁN

STAFF WRITER

Local band

As Tall as Lions

can take pride

in the raves

it's getting for

its second CD

Whether he's posing for a photo shoot, riding in the back

of his guitarist's Jeep or wolfing down a spicy tuna roll at his favorite sushi restaurant, Dan Nigro is likely to start singing. Seemingly unaware of his surroundings, he'll burst into a falsetto croon, running through snatches of songs from his band's new, self-titled album. Eventually, he catches himself.

"I've got to stop that," he says. "We work on it for hours and hours every day, and it just gets stuck in my head. It's terrible."

Actually, it's a good thing. Not long ago, Nigro had nearly lost his desire to sing, the band was splintering and the live shows simply weren't drawing crowds. For a time, As Tall as Lions seemed on

the verge of disappearing.

But the band not only survived, it surpassed expectations by releasing a mature, beautifully crafted album that's drawing rave reviews and catching the attention of discerning music magazines and Web sites. Everyone involved in the making of "As Tall as Lions," released Tuesday on East West / Triple Crown, says the same thing:

This could be the album that makes the band's career.

Produced by Mike Watts and Steve Haigler at Watts' VuDu Studios in Freeport, the album has a shimmering, oceanic quality that recalls sophisticated bands such as Radiohead, Arcade Fire or Broken Social Scene. Tracks such as "Song for Luna" and the wryly titled "Love, Love, Love (Love, Love)" spill over with lush guitars and multilayered harmonies. The lyrics are Romantic with a capital R: On "Ghosts of York," Nigro sings in his high, keening voice, "I saw you dressed all in white / I saw you pass right by / But maybe I had too much wine."

An intensity of sound

"It was a very, very intense record," Watts says. "We used sitars and triangles and glockenspiels, pianos, organs, anything we could get our hands on. There were times when all of us were in there, singing and / or banging on things in the studio."

Everything was played live,

Watts adds, without the benefit of Pro Tools software or auto-tuning to perfect any irregularities. "That's why the record sounds the way it does," he says, "like a really good band that wrote a really good record."

It's not what you might expect from a group of Long Islanders in their early 20s. (Nigro is from Massapequa Park; guitarist Saen Fitzgerald and bassist Julio Tavarez are from Massapequa; and drummer Cliff Sarcona hails from Smithtown.) The band came of age during Long Island's recent emo boom, when Taking Back Sunday and Brand New made success look easy and labels were scrambling to sign similar acts. On the strength of an EP, "Blood and Aphorisms" (produced by Watts), As Tall as Lions got snapped up by Triple Crown, which had just struck pay dirt with Brand New's breakthrough disc, "Deja Entendu."

Things were looking up for

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A roaring success

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the group, which is exactly when things began falling apart.

Sitting around a tableful of sushi at a Massapequa restaurant near the band's rehearsal space, the four musicians spent a recent afternoon discussing their shortcomings. Most of them have been friends since high school (Tavarez joined more recently, having replaced a bassist who quit in the middle of a tour) and they all speak with surprising candor. Nigro goes first, admitting that while recording "Lafcadio" he wrote few songs and often didn't show up for sessions. He hesitates to say what was distracting him, so Sarcona says it for him: "It was his girlfriend."

"I think I was immature at the time, and I think I felt like the songs would write themselves," Nigro says. "And also the fact that we had gotten signed so quickly after releasing our EP, we had all this hype around us. My head had swelled up about that."

Triple Crown founder Fred Feldman says he tried to coach

the band, but to no avail. "I wanted them to tour first and work the songs out live, but they knew better," he says archly. "We were in the midst of Brand New's success, so they thought we'd just put the record out and — boom!"

Lions' share of disappointment

That didn't happen. "Lafcadio" became an uneven mix of mature pop and teenage rock, and the album was largely overlooked. Branded as a typical Long Island band, As Tall as Lions wound up on mismatched tours with pop-punk and emo acts.

"We had tons of fans who'd write us e-mails and say, 'I'd really love to see you play in such and such a state, but you're playing with five really awful bands,'" Nigro says. "We always had a good fan base on Long Island, so we thought that would cross over everywhere. We didn't realize that in Atlanta, Georgia, not a single person knew who we were."

This time around, East West, which is helping market the album, is trying to reach older,

hipper listeners by pitching the band to indie-rock publications such as CMJ, The Sentimentalist and Amplifier. (The taste-making Web site Stereogum recently gave As Tall as Lions a rave review, posting the song "Ghosts of York" and comparing Nigro's voice to Jeff Buckley's.) And Feldman says he's hoping the band will get a chance to tour with indie-rock bands as well as young punk acts.

"One of the goals of being a musician is to write songs that my brother can listen to, who's 15, or that my father can listen to, or even the most elitist 24-year-old college grad," says Nigro. "We're not musicians that are looking to alienate anybody."

WHEN&WHERE As Tall As Lions plays Monday at 5:30 p.m. , Village Pub South, 198 Broadway, Amityville, 631-264-2320. \$10; \$12 day of show.