



CAKE OFFERS UP A SLICE OF 'COMPASSION'

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<http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Music/03/09/cake.soundcheck/index.html?iref=allsearch>

West Hollywood, California (CNN) -- John McCrea admits he had a moment of insecurity in January, when his band Cake was readying the release of its first studio album in nearly seven years. But soon that feeling turned to elation.

"Showroom of Compassion" shot to No. 1 on the Billboard Top 200 chart -- never mind that at 44,000 copies, it was the lowest-selling No. 1 in SoundScan history.

"We thought we'd be squashed like a bug, right Vince?" the frontman says to trumpeter Vince DiFiore, seated next to him. "And then we were No. 1, instead."

Seems fans were eager to re-embrace the quirky Sacramento alt-rock band and its new single, the wryly titled "Sick of You."

"The repressed hostility is still there," McCrea assures listeners.

"Showroom of Compassion" was released independently, on Cake's own Upbeat Records.

"We had to extricate ourselves from a major label deal that wasn't working out, as far as we were concerned," explains the frontman. "As soon as we did that, we realized we had to either start our own label or sign with some other label. We really weren't trusting anyone, so we thought we'd start our own label."

Cake has always been a DIY group -- even during the '90s, when they were enjoying massive radio airplay with such hits as "The Distance" and "Never There."

"We've made our own posters and put them up on telephone poles, and designed our own artwork, and did our own videos and produced our own albums. We've produced every one of our albums ourselves. Even when we didn't know how to produce, we produced ourselves," McCrea says. "We're just sort of this home crafts project that went too far."

CNN spoke with McCrea and DiFiore just before sound check at the Troubadour in West Hollywood, California.

CNN: It's been nearly seven years since your last studio album. What have you guys been doing all this time, besides fighting to get off your major label?

Vince DiFiore: It was fair time to either stay with them or go, and we decided to go. There wasn't a lot of fighting involved.

John McCrea: I don't know that major labels are the best deal for bands like us. Increasingly, as the value of recording music sinks to zero, it doesn't make sense to be wasteful in the process. We have to become more economical, not less economical. You know, major labels have a history of being pretty wasteful of money, and resources and talent.

And we also sort of rehabbed our studio (in Sacramento), and turned it into a solar-powered studio. So we can honestly say that this album was produced with 100% solar electricity, which we think makes sense living in California. It seemed wrong for us not to do it, actually.

CNN: Did you guys actually get up there yourselves, with ladders and hammers?

McCrea: (pointing to DiFiore): He got up there.

DiFiore: I actually filmed the process from the beginning to the end, and make a very concise video about it. You can see it at cakemusic.com.

CNN: Speaking of your website, you've got some interesting categories that other bands don't have. You have an advice column.

McCrea: Vince has a masters degree in psychology that he got before he was in the band. So I figure it's not like it's coming out of nowhere, right?

DiFiore: I'm pretty careful not to give horrible answers, just so somebody takes it and, you know ...

McCrea: Commits suicide or something.

DiFiore: I think it's also a good service just for them to write in. You know, the process of them having someplace to write to -- dropping that note in the box, so to speak, is good, because you sort of get a logical answer back. Even if we don't answer it.

CNN: Do you play psychologist in the band when you guys get into fights Vince?

DiFiore: My psychology is just to be quiet. There's a certain level of maturity, or friendship skills, or just people skills that everybody has. Nobody ever goes too haywire or too crazy on each other.

McCrea: Nobody's a complete sociopath.

CNN: So let's talk about "Sick of You," the first single. Sounds like vintage Cake.

McCrea: Speaking of difficult interpersonal relationships.

CNN: "Sick of You." What are you saying there?

McCrea: I think it started for me as a break-up song. Then as I kept writing, it turned into a break-up-with-the-world song. And it seemed to match the animosity that you feel in the air in the United States. There's a sort of hostility that seems very popular now-a-days. It's everybody's fault, so I thought that would be an interesting subject to write about.

CNN: There's also a song called "Federal Funding."

DiFiore: The song feels like a celebration to me. Sort of a hoe-down about a bounty coming from the government. You hear about countries like Denmark with cultural funding -- artists getting federal grants. That's a party, you know.

McCrea: When I was a kid, I lived in Scotland for a little while, and it was really amazing to see artists sort of not really caring about health insurance, you know. That's a huge black cloud over anybody that does something creative here.

CNN: Now that you guys have gone indie, you have to think about things like health insurance. You can no longer sign onto the record label's health insurance.

McCrea: No, I have to correct you right there. Record companies have never cared to do something about health insurance for bands. They won't touch you with a 10-foot pole.

CNN: So who do you go through? AFTRA (the actor's union)?

McCrea: Yes. Oddly enough, musicians have to rely on the generosity of the actors. But it's nice of them. If we sing on television, we can be part of AFTRA. But it's unfortunate, and sad, and disappointing that musicians can't get something together for ourselves. Kind of interesting.

CNN: Maybe if you all got together, you could get a group discount at Blue Cross.

McCrea: We're too drug-addled and narcissistic, I think.

DiFiore: There's the pre-existing condition of just being in a rock band.

CNN: How do you describe the sound of your band?

DiFiore: Well, downstream from mainstream.

McCrea: High-impact easy-listening.

DiFiore: If Hank Williams, Sr. and Sly Stone were at a party together, and played AC/DC records backwards. I think that's a really good description.

CNN: Do you stay up at night thinking about this stuff?

DiFiore: No, these are things that somebody else wrote.

McCrea: Music critics.

CNN: You guys talk about not having followed any trends. But that ultimately has led to your longevity.

McCrea: Right. We were never invited to the party, and when the party got broken up by the cops, we didn't get arrested.