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POP'S BRASH NEW PRINCE

Lukas Forchhammer, frontman of Danish band Lukas Graham, has a global smash in "7 Years," a crazy backstory (jailbreaking gangsters, a hippie commune) and blunt opinions on Taylor Swift, Adele and everything else

BY NICK DUERDEN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY PIP

ONE OF THE HARDEST LESSONS FOR ANY new pop star is learning when to say "no." Luckily for **Lukas Graham**, the Danish quartet behind "7 Years," one of 2016's biggest global hits, its frontman has no problem putting his foot down. Singer-songwriter **Lukas Forchhammer**, 27, and his band — drummer **Mark Falgren** (28), bassist **Magnus Larsson** (26) and keyboardist **Kasper Daugaard** (33) — look happy serenading staffers at a piano on a typically cloudy March afternoon at Warner Brothers HQ in London. But Forchhammer's smile turns to a scowl when it's suggested he wear something more stylish than a plain white T-shirt for a photo shoot afterward.

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From left: Falgren, Larsson, Forchhammer and Daugaard of Lukas Graham photographed March 11 at Warner Music U.K. in London. For an exclusive behind-the-scenes video of Forchhammer discussing the band's hit "7 Years," go to Billboard.com or Billboard.com/ipad.

"If I am going to have my picture taken," he says later, "then I'm going to wear my own f—ing clothes, not a biker leather jacket with a bunch of **Michael Jackson** zips. Too many people don't have big enough balls or ovaries to be themselves. I do."

Nonetheless, Lukas Graham's debut smash, "7 Years," which is No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100 and still growing, is undeniably the work of a man who knows how to connect with an audience. The pop ballad features Forchhammer sounding like a self-help guru walking listeners through the stages of life: "Once I was 7 years old," he sings, "my mama told me go make yourself some friends or you'll be lonely." By the song's end, he has come full

he did, the f—er," he answers vaguely. "He got rehabilitated in prison; I visited him a few times, then he busted out and fled to Iran. Now I Skype with him once in a while. A lot of my friends aren't God's best children, you could say. They grew up selling drugs, carrying guns, having bulletproof vests but they are quite endearing, really."

Forchhammer was born to a Danish mother and an Irish father and raised in Christiania, a self-governed district in the middle of Copenhagen. Comprising a former army base abandoned in 1971, it's essentially a neighborhood-size squat and is now seen as a modern hippie utopia. "It's a social experiment that worked," Forchhammer

because "I write the songs. No matter how much I've tried, the other lads just aren't lyricists.") They signed to a local Universal subsidiary, Copenhagen Records, which suggested they film some "noncorporate-looking material" to put online in order to create a faux underground buzz. "The media made up this nice story about us being an unsigned group that put a video on YouTube, but that's not how it happened," says Forchhammer. "Everyone needs a f—ing story, right?"

Either way, the plan worked: The band's homemade-looking performance videos blew up online, and the group is now signed to Warner Bros. worldwide. The label, which has had trouble breaking new acts recently, sees the band as a top priority, but Forchhammer has his own singular vision and won't be easily influenced. According to label chairman/CEO **Cameron Strang**, that's what makes him such a promising talent. "He wants to do things in an authentic way that's true to his life," says Strang. "And to be a great, successful artist, it takes a strong point of view."

Take Forchhammer's response to "people who said I shouldn't sing songs like 'Drunk in the Morning'" or "Better Than Yourself (Criminal Mind Pt. 2)" and instead stick to touching ballads—several album tracks are inspired by his father's sudden death in 2013 from a heart attack at age 61—and love songs. "I was like: F— off. Ask **Taylor Swift** to write f—ing love songs. That's why I can't listen to a whole record of **Adele**'s. She has the most amazing voice, but people must have convinced her they just want to hear love songs."

Perhaps he has street cred to maintain. A guy has to be able to hold his head up high in his hometown, right? "I was walking down the road late at night recently, and these big gangsters came up to me," he says. "At first I was like, 'Uh-oh.' But they just wanted to pay me a compliment for 'Criminal Mind Pt. 2.' 'Beautiful song you wrote for our friend,' they said. And I was like, 'Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you.'" ●

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circle to his own future kids, à la **Harry Chapin**'s "Cat's in the Hat." "Soon I'll be 60 years old ... Will I have a lot of children who can warm me?" In the week ending March 31, "7 Years" was the best-selling song in the United States and had the largest increase in radio audience, according to Nielsen Music. It already has hit No. 1 in Australia, Belgium, New Zealand, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

On record Forchhammer can often sound like a perpetually smiling **Bruno Mars** mixed with a bit of **Ed Sheeran**, but in person he has an unmistakable wrong-side-of-the-tracks swagger. Some songs on the band's self-titled debut album, released April 1, amplify the poppy appeal of "7 Years," but then there are tracks like "Better Than Yourself (Criminal Mind Pt. 2)," a ruminative ballad set to, of all things, **Beethoven's** "Moonlight Sonata" that concerns the hitherto little-known problem of Denmark's gangland culture.

"That song is about a friend of mine," says Forchhammer. "On April 24, 2012, he got riddled with bullets in his car." Why? "Well, by doing what

says proudly. "The people renovated the area themselves, putting in a sewage system, phone system, everything." But it was also infamous for its unpoliced drug quarter, to which the city's gangs flocked. "Our neighborhood was ground zero, where all the scores were settled. But it was home."

Forchhammer's overall appearance is average, but his talents—and his confidence in them—are not. He started singing at age 3 and began classical training at 8. "I was still young when I realized my voice could make people shut the f— up," he says with a grin. He found school boring and occasionally got into trouble with the police—he was first frisked when he was 10. "But I've only been arrested once, for a tiny bit of weed," he says. "The cop was very understanding. A lot of people don't function when they smoke, but I do quite well on it."

He began writing pop songs in his teens and by 2010 had taken on the moniker Lukas Graham—Graham was his father's middle name—and enlisted his bandmates, all childhood friends. (The group trades under his name alone, he explains,