



Hello, Camden!

The stakes are high for Baltimore's Charm City Devils as they team up with Mötley Crüe for a shot at rock 'n' roll glory.

By Andrea E. McHugh

Not even an unforgiving, scorching summer sun could convince the Charm City Devils to trade their weathered leather jackets and skin-tight black jeans for more sensible clothes. They are, after all, aspiring rock stars playing a much-hyped show at Camden, New Jersey's Susquehanna Bank Center, outside Philadelphia. As part of one of the year's most highly anticipated tours, *Crüe Fest 2*, the Baltimore rockers are low men on a multi-band bill—opening for Godsmack, Theory of a Deadman, Drowning Pool, and legendary rockers Mötley Crüe—but

they hope that exposure gained from this coveted slot will propel them toward stardom.

As concertgoers trickle in, vocalist John Allen, guitarists Nick Kay and Vic Karrera, bassist Anthony Arambula, and drummer Jason Heiser crank up songs from their debut CD, *Let's Rock-N-Roll*. Whipping their hair to thundering drumbeats and snarling guitar riffs, what they lack in set time (less than an hour), they make up for in enthusiasm. It's enough to draw cheers from the swelling crowd, who are most likely hearing the Devils for the first time.

The five longtime friends, who've waited a lifetime for this moment, also understand that, at their age, this could be their last shot. "When I was up there during the set," Allen says afterwards, "there was one point I said something, and I actually got choked up, you know? To be up here . . ."

His voice trails off, and he hangs his head of carefully coifed, highlighted hair to take a deep breath and collect himself. Still sweating from the show, he and his bandmates are sitting on folding chairs and a timeworn loveseat in a dim theater area on the amphitheater grounds. Finally, the frontman lets out a tension-breaking chuckle and finishes his thought: "To be up here with my best friends," he looks around, voice shaking, "is really f**king cool, man."

Allen takes a moment to exhale and wipe his eyes, clearly surprised to have gotten so emotional. Next to him, Kay, who grew up with Allen in East Baltimore near the city-county line, can relate to his friend's raw reaction. "It's special enough—oh my God, *I'm gonna get emotional now*," he laughs. "It's special enough that we're here with Mötley Crüe, but then, we're friends, and all the songs are from the heart."

Before making too much of an Oprah moment, Kay adds, "It is different [this time around], but we still have that same 13-year-old stinking mentality—we're stupid as all hell when it comes to never giving up."

A luminary on the local rock scene, Al-

len, who declines to give his age, flirted with stardom as the drummer for Child's Play in the late '80s/early '90s and later SR-71. Both bands signed to major labels, got some radio airplay, toured the country, and earned respectable commercial success. But neither group enjoyed long-term staying power. Kay was also a member of Child's Play, but the other Devils mostly paid their dues in bands that stayed closer to home.

All the Devils are married with children—except for Heiser, who is nonetheless a father figure to his girlfriend's daughter. As Kay tears into a guitar solo in Camden, under the bright lights with a fist-pumping audience before him, his wife, Jenn, cares for his two sons back in Baltimore. She's also pregnant with the couple's first daughter. For the next two months, they will stay in touch via phone calls, e-mail, and—thanks to Arambula, the Devils' in-house technology guru—iChat.

Leaving home was a lot for Arambula, an IT contractor by day, to consider. "It was like, the last thing on my mind," he says, but his first major tour was too much to pass up. "I didn't think my first time out would be with Mötley Crüe!"

Working from the road, Arambula often finds himself catering to the demands of his day job until it's time to rock at night. "Sometimes, I'm up at 7:30 in the morning," he says, "and the other guys will all be sleeping, and sometimes I'll work 'til like 4 o'clock, up until the show, and have to close the laptop then get into that frame of mind."

His brother, Victor Karrera, took time off from his business designing custom motorcycle seats and car interiors for his Baltimore-based Victor's Custom Interiors.

Arambula, the father of two girls, and Karrera, father of two boys, admit the road they've traveled to play music hasn't always been an easy one. "It's like we sacrificed all the way," says Karrera. "We've sacrificed our family functions and going to dinner on Friday nights with our girl."

Allen adds: "It's been years of driving a piece of s**t car and not knowing your extended family because, like Victor said, you're missing out on all that stuff."

Allen has had unwavering encouragement from his wife of 10 years, Erin, who's



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at the Camden gig. When asked if she's excited, she beams: "Oh, you have no idea. Maybe more so [for me] . . . The first time I saw him up on a really big stage I got choked up, I was like, 'There he is doing his thing,' and now, there aren't even words."

She calls the band and their wives and children a big family, and says as far as her 3-year-old daughter knows, *all* daddies sing in bands for a living. "I got maps for the little kids, so they can color in where their daddy is everyday," Erin says.

Besides families, the Devils have mortgages and bills waiting for them at home. So this cross-country trek—though glamorous at times—can be seen as a seven-week business trip. The fleeting time onstage is the easy part, with the rest of the day often devoted to a repetitive cycle of media interviews, checking in and out of hotels, and logging seemingly endless hours in the van.

It's a grind, a vagabond's existence, and it demands unflagging commitment. "It's in my veins/I guess I sold my soul/I gave

everything I had to rock 'n' roll," Allen sings with bravado on "Let's Rock 'n' Roll."

He notes that many of his songs are, indeed, autobiographical and address aspects of his high-risk, high-reward profession. "I'm bettin' on heaven, cuz I've been through hell" he sings on the appropriately-titled track "Money."

"I'm almost home, right where I'm supposed to be/Well I'm almost home, won't you leave a light on for me?" is from "Almost Home," the lament of a homesick rocker.

In fact, one gets the impression that Baltimore always looms large for Allen, especially when he drops details such as "the North Point sky, alight with Bethlehem fires" into "Almost Home."

"We're a Baltimore band," Allen says unabashedly. "It's part of our fabric."

None of the Charm City Devils have strayed far from their local roots, and that's actually worked to their advantage. In fact, it helped get them signed.

More than a year ago, a batch of base-

ment-recorded demos—songs that eventually comprised *Let's Rock-N-Roll*—got airplay and went into heavy rotation at 98 Rock. They also got the attention of Mötley Crüe bassist Nikki Sixx, who signed the band to his Eleven Seven Music label. "When we first heard Charm City Devils, our initial feeling was, 'This is a *real* rock band,'" says Sixx, who made the Devils his first signing.

Likening the band to rock demigods Aerosmith and AC/DC, Sixx credits the band's hometown for influencing the Devils' blues-rooted, raw sound. "I like the fact that they're from Baltimore and the way they relate the workingman's experience," says Sixx. "They're not from New York or L.A. You don't hear many bands from Baltimore, and these guys carry on tradition with their own relevant and modern sound with classic riffs."

It's those classic riffs Sixx is betting will quench fans' thirst for honest, beefy, gritty rock music at a time when manufactured, Disney-financed, fly-by-night bands are all the rage. And in an age of easily pirated music



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downloads and pop music A.D.D., the Devils have returned to grassroots sales tactics and follow each set with a meet-and-greet, where they talk to fans, pose for pictures, and sign every last bit of swag fans put in front of them. "It seems like it's working," notes Allen. "We've sold out of CDs twice on the tour. It's such a good vibe out there; it's sort of a love fest."

The band is also utilizing social networking sites such as Facebook. "You really have to be up on that now—people want that interaction," explains Arambula, who manages the band's Facebook page. "It's a really cool way of staying in touch with the people and fans we meet out on the road."

Arambula also blogs about the Devils' day-to-day life on tour. "For me, it was important that the video blogs be real," he says, "and so many people were like 'We love your blogs. Thank you for letting us live vicariously through you.'"

The tech-savvy push also fueled the Devils' "Turn Me On 2" viral video, a promo for JVC Mobile Entertainment, which has

logged 4.5 million views at *spin.com*.

At this point, the band is encouraged, especially because hard rock fans can be maniacally loyal. They don't have to look far for evidence of that, as this tour attracts throngs of devotees who've made Mötley Crüe rock royalty for two and a half decades. The Crüe is that rare, enviable breed of rock band that the Devils emulate.

And now, they're actually touring with their idols. "It's just been surreal," says Allen. "I mean, I need to get a thesaurus to find out what another word for surreal is, because it's just been a crazy, crazy experience."

He recalls trying to keep cool at the press conference last spring when the festival lineup was announced. "I'm sitting there, in New York City," he says, "and I'm at this table with all these rock icons, and I'm just thinking, 'Please don't ask me a question!' And that night I get up on stage with Mötley Crüe, to sing with them, and I'm like, 'Oh my God, I'm on stage with Mötley Crüe at Madison Square Garden! This is crazy! I

hope my fly isn't down.'"

Allen seems truly amazed by recent events, "to be in this place after struggling for so long, for these things to have happened to us," he says.

Still, he notes that some things never change. "We were lost yesterday, talk about being stupid," he says, triggering a round of roaring laughter from the rest of the band. "We were lost, and we're trying to find the hotel with the iPhone."

A Spinal Tap moment, perhaps, but at least they didn't get lost making their way to the stage. "With the brain trust that is this band," continues Allen, "we were lost for like a half hour, and finally Jason goes, 'Why don't we just call the hotel and get directions?' So, we're not dealing with rocket scientists here."

"But we made it," Arambula declares.

With a sly smile, Allen concurs. "We made it," he says. **E**

This is ANDREA MCHUGH'S first story for Baltimore.



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