



## CHASING THE DREAM: VESPER CONTINUES TO ACCUMULATE AWARDS AND SUMMON SUCCESS

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By Niyaz Pirani

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In the cramped rehearsal space of drummer John Adams' Laguna Hills home, pictures of rock gods including Robert Plant, Jimi Hendrix, Queen and The Beatles hang on the bright red walls.

None of these musicians have been copied by Adams and his compatriots — singer Isaiah Mickelson, bassist JJ Simonon and guitarist Jason Owen — but add to those legends some Crowded House, Pink Floyd and early U2 among others, and the recipe that results in Vesper's melodic soft-rock starts to congeal.

"My parents were not very well-rounded ... our edgy station was 94.7 The Wave. We listened to Christian radio, which is about as two-dimensional as it gets," Mickelson says of his early influences. "My first rock 'n' roll record was Petra's This Means War!, which was very exciting for me and outside of that, U2 was kind of the first band, like so many others, that crossed the lines between secular and spiritual."

It's a dynamic the singer has been working to balance for several years now. In 2001, Vesper released its only full-length record, *Sleeping with Ayn*. Mickelson, who could easily double as a scruffier Val Kilmer, had made rounds in various local acts before starting Vesper as an outlet for the heartfelt songs he had been penning.

He hooked up with the current Vesper lineup in what he describes as an arduous process. "JJ's been playing with me for four years now," Mickelson says. "We've gone through quite a few musicians. I think John was our 49th drummer that we auditioned."

At first, the Vesper sound, which blends smoky singer-songwriter dynamics to pop sensibilities, was something Adams had to adjust to. "The style was different from what I was used to playing," the kitman says. "I'd like to think I'm diverse, but my roots were blues and funk and stuff like that. This music was so melodic and interesting to me. It had great depth and lyrical content and I just thought, 'Wow, this band is really an opportunity to go somewhere.'"

While waiting for the band's breakthrough, the members of Vesper, all over 30 years old, have day jobs ranging from the sale of industrial adhesives (Adams) to something that Mickelson ambiguously says kind of deals with, but is clearly not, the sale of insurance.

Like many other OC residents, three of them surf and one of the members, says the band, tries to (Owen). That's where most of the OC ties are cut, especially when it comes to the local music scene, says Mickelson, who believes Vesper fans tend to be a different breed than the average OC concert fodder.

Mickelson says Vesper absolutely appreciates its hometown fans, but the band agrees it's more shocking to see how well its hometown scene appreciates it. The band was chosen in both 2006 and 2007 as the "Best Live Acoustic Band" at the Orange County Music Awards, and it's an award Vesper takes to heart.

"I think we sound better live than we do recorded," Adams says, citing it as one of the reasons the band records live-to-tape. Additionally, the band has been cooking up tracks in Adams' home studio for months and says they have enough material to cut two albums right now. Getting those songs together, though, can sometimes be a challenge, Simonon says.

"With all those different styles of music, I think the culmination of what we put forward is so hard to put a definition to it," he says. "There's definitely some challenging times where somebody says 'Hey, can you try and bend a little bit here to make it coalesce.'"

"It can be magical sometimes," Adams adds. "Other times, we can't find the magic to save our lives and we're all trying to go at one time."

The struggle to make great music seems to weigh heaviest on Mickelson, though, who is about as accessible as a bank vault when it comes to talking about the stuff he writes.

"I always experience trepidation when talking about lyrics just because they spring from quite an intimate place and I need to tap that when we play ... I'm reticent to put the guts on the table," he says, playing up the guarded singer-songwriter persona to perfection.

What the frontman will talk about, though, is his quest to become the best musician he can be, something that not only has built the band's work ethic, but obviously inspires his fellow members into being better players as well.

"My heart is always in bed with making a timeless work," Mickelson says. "I like the studio and I'd like the chance to work with a producer who really has the capacity to guide and direct."

Vesper plans on heading into the studio with Toad the Wet Sprocket guitarist Todd Nichols behind the boards. The strummer for the popular '90s outfit will produce a single for the band, and based on the outcome, possibly sign on to helm Vesper's proper sophomore effort.

The road ahead is something the band has been anticipating for a long time. Adams sums it up best when comparing the band's award-winning live show to the qualities necessary to creating the timeless work Vesper strives to craft.

"If we can be captured by the music, then we're going to capture the audience. If we're bored with it, the audience will see that," he says. "So we're trying to keep it interesting for ourselves, but to also make the songs be the best they can be. If that means tearing them down to the individual notes, then we will."

Listen yourself at [www.thevesper.com](http://www.thevesper.com) Photography by Kathryn LeBoye