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Lightning Strikes: M & K

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Indie-dance duo Matt & Kim have wasted no time in the new year: They kicked off a national tour alongside Passion Pit last month, played the legendary Madison Square Garden and saw their fourth studio-release, Lightning, make it on "must" lists from Entertainment Weekly and Complex magazines—and for good reason. From the determined "Not That Bad" to the dance-ready single "Let's Go," Lightning, produced in their Brooklyn bedroom, follows in true Matt & Kim fashion with giddy beats and playful lyrics. A departure from Matt Johnson and Kim Schifino's widely-successful 2010 release Sidewalks, "I Wonder" offers new arrangements and tests ideas borrowed from hip-hop and pop chart-toppers. We caught up with Matt to discuss the new album, the art of not-perfect music and streaking through Times Square.

E: You put a lot of energy in your live shows. How does that energy translate from your live shows to your album, and vice versa?
MJ: I think they're two very different things. One has very little to do with the other. I'm glad there's both sides to it because I love writing music and that's a great part of this, and I love playing shows too. They're two very different things—I think if you heard Matt & Kim live you would assume it was very different from the album, and I think hearing the album you might assume it's a little different live. We just try to do the best we can at both.

E: What's your writing process like?
MJ: It’s very collaborative between Kim and myself. But even this last album we did without a producer—as well as the Grand album, we did our Sidewalks album, our third album, with a producer—because we realized that we know so well what we want that it’s best when it’s just unfiltered Matt and Kim, Kim and Matt. It’s just the two of us doing all the stupid stuff we want to do.

E: I know you have a background in film and Matt & Kim videos are typically outlandish. Where do the ideas come from?
MJ: Most or all of our ideas have been an idea I've had. [For "Let's Go"], the "Awkward Family Photos" one, we actually put a net out to other directors to [hear] what they were thinking. And so there was this guy, Dugan O'Neal, [that] had this idea, you know, based on stuff he'd seen around on the Internet. I think what it always comes down to is having one simple core idea, as opposed to lots of music videos you see have no idea—they're just a band playing in a somewhat cool-looking place with nice lighting and whatnot, but it's not really an idea. We always want to have a core of an idea in all of our music videos, whether it's, you know, Matt and Kim get food thrown at them for three minutes or we take our clothes off in Times Square and beat the crap out of each other.

E: Speaking of Times Square and "Lessons Learned," was that all completely real? You were butt-ass naked?
MJ: Oh yeah. It was February and it was very cold and an awkward place to take your clothes off. It was freezing cold. Kim didn't want to do it at all, but I had the idea and I just had to convince her for a couple months that it was a good idea. I mean finally, after winning the VMA, I think she had to admit that it was a good idea. We've seen people [that think it's] a green screen, you know all this conspiracy stuff about it, but we were in Times Square in February and it was cold.

E: It seems that recording albums in bedrooms or less conventional spaces is becoming a trend. Why record Lightning in your bedroom when you have professional studios at your dispense?
MJ: I think there’s certain things that when you’re in a studio—I guess for me it’s not always the most creative atmosphere, being that sometimes you’re like, ‘Oh, I want to try this thing that’s probably going to be terrible but I just want to try it.’ And then when you’re in an expensive studio that you know at least somebody is paying a lot for you, you’re like, ‘Yeah, I shouldn’t try it, I shouldn’t waste the time.’ But when you’re just doing it in your bedroom it’s kind of like if you want to try it because you’re on your own it’s like, why not? I’m just playing around in my bedroom. I feel like for me there’s a certain freedom that goes along with that. And also I think we have a certain sort of aesthetic that they’re calling mid-fi these days, which isn’t hi-fi and isn’t really lo-fi—it’s trying not to make things sound too slick.
Sometimes when I hear things that sound really slick it kind of distances me from that. So I was like, well if I want things to sound not-perfect I can make things sound not-perfect. That’s my forte: making things sound not great.

**E**: How has the new album been received by fans?

**MJ**: Great! Better than we ever expected. The album came out the day we left on our [fall] tour. I thought, ‘Well we shouldn’t play too much off the new album because people aren’t going to know it yet.’ When I go to shows I want to hear something I know. But we put about five songs into the set from the album *Lightning*, and the way people sang along and danced and whatnot I would have thought it had been out for years. That kind of response is all we hope for, is dancing and singing along.

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Check out both *Passion Pit* and Matt & Kim’s latest singles at ethosmagazine.org