

LOVE THE SONGS YOU'RE WITH

Members of Finger Eleven take time with their songs. After all, they'll be playing their hits for a long time **BY BRYAN BORZYKOWSKI**

If you're going to get songwriting advice from anyone, Rush's Alex Lifeson is probably *the* guy to spend a few minutes chatting with. And that's exactly what James Black, Finger Eleven's guitarist and songwriter, did. "Alex told me that, with the amount of touring they do, you really have to love the songs you play out there every night," says Black, recalling a moment when he and lead singer Scott Anderson went to hang out at Lifeson's studio.

That piece of wisdom is a good one for any act, but it's especially pertinent to Finger Eleven, whose star has risen since it released its multi-platinum, self-titled record in 2003. Having a huge tune off that disc, "One Thing," meant the song was played at every show, and with 200 dates in a year, you couldn't fault the band for hating their hits.

But that's not so with Finger Eleven. Not only do they play "One Thing" but the band's latest disc, *Them vs. You vs. Me*, has produced "Paralyzer," another much sought-after

single. "We know we're going to play these songs forever," says Black. "So in order to make it onto the record, they have to pass our own internal test. If one becomes more popular than another, all the songs are still something we love and we're sure of."

Putting their work under "greater scrutiny," as Black says, is precisely why the band is so successful. They don't record everything they write, and they don't rush it. Hence the three-year space between records. "We wrote for a year and a half," says Black. "So yeah, that took a while. We were looking for something really special that showcased everyone's abilities and were

still great songs, so it took that long for all of us to agree."

The extended writing period afforded the band an opportunity to try out some new songwriting tricks. In the past, the group would get together and jam for months without recording anything, just fleshing out tracks. While the five members (also including guitarist Rick Jakkett, bassist Sean Anderson and drummer Rich Beddoe) still do that, they also utilized e-mail to send tracks between band members and their home studios.

Black in particular liked using his CPU to record. "It's a whole new interaction," he says. "It's ironic to be in separate homes, but it's enhancing the process because people need to think of an idea to contribute. It opened up a whole other level of songwriting."

This route to recording success hasn't just

helped the band create its own smash hits, it's also allowed Black to work more on other projects. His songwriting talents have recently been used to score the upcoming indie film *Clear Red*. He's been working on the flick with a friend, and while it's not a Finger Eleven project, Anderson does have a role in the movie.

Scoring is new to Black, but it's something he's always wanted to do. However, writing for the big screen has been challenging, to say the least. "This is hard!" he says enthusiastically. "My imagination likes to run off on its own, but because a scene has to be attached to a sound in a certain way, the music has to be written for the sake of the picture, not just the sake of the music."

It's likely he'll do another one, maybe even with the entire band. "I love the challenge of it and I love the end result, but it's a hard thing to achieve," he says. "My level of respect for composers is through the roof."

Besides film, Black and the band have found success lending their music to soundtracks and video games. Their music can be found in the games *SSX 3* and *Burnout 3: Takedown*, and they've contributed to a few blockbusters including *The Punisher* and *Elektra*. While selling songs to film and gaming companies has brought Finger Eleven even more fans and big bucks, Black downplays the group's contribution to these other forms of entertainment. "They usually just ask

if they can use an existing song," he says. At one time, the band was approached to write an original song for the movie *Daredevil*. Unfortunately, it didn't work out so well. "They sent us a chase scene," he says. "We wrote this song and they didn't love it at all."

The writing and recording sessions weren't a total bust, however. The track, "Good Times," wound up instead on the band's self-titled disc, and the group learned a thing or two about writing quickly. "It was a great thing, a great experiment," says Black. "We wrote it fast because we had a deadline. It was neat to see that we could have results under that kind of pressure, but they wanted something else."

So will Black's discovery of focus and speed help Finger Eleven be more efficient songwriters for their next album? Probably not. "I think we'll start writing a few ideas here and there," says the guitarist. "At some point, we'll make it into the studio."

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■ FYI

Publisher: Finger Eleven Publishing Inc. and Renfield Music Publishing Inc. (ASCAP)
Selected discography: *Tip* (1998), *Greyest of Blue Skies* (2000), *Finger Eleven* (2003), *Them vs. You vs. Me* (2007)
SOCAN members since 1996 (Black, Anderson, Jakkett), 2003 (Beddoe)
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