

French Kicks

French Kicks are obsessed with possibility. For this band experimentation and self-discovery are the whole game, and the results of their continued explorations have set them in a category all their own, and earned them a dedicated audience. From the time they began as a raucous four piece with a singing drummer, to the more refined, intricate and subtle experimental pop band they are today, French Kicks have taken that experimentation always further, consistently trying to surprise and surpass themselves with each new chapter. Two Thousand, the bold newest installment in the story, offers a rare collection of thrills and intrigues, composed of sounds both foreign and familiar. Each song offers its own logic and its own rewards: masterfully crafted arrangements that are fun to listen to, but never obvious, with lyrics that resonate with truth while still being open and suggestive.

Vocalist, keyboardist Nick Stumpf and guitarist Josh Wise wrote the bulk of material over the course of 2005 while living in New York. As always, they avoided any repetition from previous efforts by trying new songwriting techniques, new instruments, and new recordings situations. They then decamped to Los Angeles, along with the rest of the band, and spent a very, very intense month in LA with producer Doug Boehm. What emerged is both a departure and a continuation of the French Kicks oeuvre. Two Thousand taps into the energy and excitement of their earliest records while adding new sounds and a mastery of song craft and studio technique.

The founding members of the French Kicks have all known each other forever. Nick Stumpf and Matt Stinchcomb met nearly two decades ago in grade school and played in bands together throughout high school and college. Bassist Lawrence Stumpf is Nick's younger brother. In 1998 Nick and Matt met Alabama native Josh at a party shortly after moving to Brooklyn. The bond was immediate and they became the French Kicks quickly thereafter.

Their first two early EPs were recorded as an extension of their live shows—four friends plugging in and playing. Their debut album “One Time Bells” was a ramshackle but brilliant piece of work showing a group chafing at self-imposed limitations. In 2003, Nick emerged from behind drum kit, brought in drummer Aaron Thurston and the band began an evolution from its original incarnation to something wholly new with Nick and Josh more formally taking over the writing and recording of Trial of the Century. Trial proved to be their breakthrough both artistically and commercially. The mature songwriting, sophisticated arrangements, and coherency of sound and aesthetic wooed critics and granted the band an audience who, finally, loved the French Kicks for the music they made—rather than the subgenre or scene they were never really a part of.

The emerging dynamic that fueled the artistic success of “Trial” would test relations between bandmembers, and before entering the studio to record Two Thousand, founding member Matt Stinchcomb decided amicably to leave the group.

Reuniting with Trial of the Century producer Doug Boehm, the French Kicks sought to bring a stable hand to a band whose experimental nature and perfectionism can lead to a stressful studio environment. According to Nick, however, “there was no element of calm. “We all, Doug included, fell quickly into a resigned, fatalistic doggedness.” Both Nick and Josh put an extreme, almost absurd, amount of pressure on themselves to improve on both the songwriting and production of Trial. The sessions were long and tense with Doug pushing the band as hard as they pushed themselves.

The results are some of the finest, most powerful, and also most beautiful songs by the French Kicks. Two of Josh and Nick’s most pop-oriented compositions, “Knee High” and “Also Ran,” have a power recalling their earlier recordings but a finesse emblematic of their current sound. A highlight of the set is opener “So Far We Are,” one of the Kicks most soulful songs to date. While the melody and guitar riffs are immediate, repeated listens reveal layers of supporting instrumentation, rhythm tracks, and counter-melodies. Deeper cuts in the album like “England Just Will Not Let You Recover” and “Go On” showcase their layered approach to songwriting with various instruments, recognizable and foreign, creating an intriguing landscape for Nick’s melodic ideas.

To bring the songs on Two Thousand to a live audience, the French Kicks, who’ve been touring continually since 2001, have added Kush El Amin to assist with extra percussion, second guitar, and a lot of keyboards: “basically everything we don’t have enough hands to play.” They’ll be on the road through all of 2006 and 2007, and Two Thousand will be released July 18, 2006.