

Interview: Keeley Davis of ENGINE DOWN & DENALI - 4/5/02



Engine Down

Engine Down has been a long-standing highlight in the Virginia indie-rock scene. After having first forming at James Madison University, the band has since made the move to Richmond, signed to Lovitt Records, and has just released their third album, *Demure*. ED frontman Keeley Davis and guitarist Jonathan Fuller are also in Jade Trees baby darling Denali, whose new self-titled album was released only one week after *Demure*. Both records provide gut-wrenching looks into the human condition with beautiful results. While *Demure* shows the aggressive, rhythm-centered side, *Denali* sounds almost mournful, with singer Maura Davis cool, breathy vocals that rest somewhere between Bjork and Billie Holiday.

Both records are leaps and bounds ahead of

anything else in the genre. I recently had the chance to sit and talk with Keeley Davis after their performance at this years MACRoCk festival in Harrisonburg, VA about how he splits time between the two bands, satisfying the two labels and rocking out with his kid sister.

LOTD: First off, lets talk about Engine Downs new record, *Demure*. Its a lot more raw than your previous records.

Keeley: Do you mean recording-wise?

LOTD: Yeah, you dont have as many harmony backing vocals and you dont have as many keyboards and you had cello and other strings on your past records.

Keeley: Yeah, the last one was pretty involved. Well, this is the third album weve done, and with every album people have commented that they liked the live versions of the songs twice as much and were like Well, wed like to recreate that. With the second album we wanted to branch out and do some different things that we normally couldnt do playing live. There were so many comments and we love playing live so much that we wanted to use [producer] Brian McTurnin, who has done some really good records before with such a huge sound. He did this Cave-In record that just blew my mind. We wanted to work with him and hve a real live sound. So we went for that and it came out well I guess.

LOTD: How is it going splitting your time between Denali and Engine Down? Is that hard for you or does it come fairly naturally?

Keeley: So far its been easy. Engine Down is definitely full time right now. None of us have any other real jobs, you know, were just touring as much as we can. Denali has been a band for about a year now, coming on to two I think. So were still pretty new, this is our first album. And [Denali front-woman] Maura, my sister, is still in school, so there are limited areas where we can tour, so right now its pretty easy. Engine Down will go out for a month, come back, and then Denali will go out on the weekends and stuff. Coming up next June is when Denali will be going to the West Coast and be doing West Coast touring. In the fall, Mauras taking off some time so we can do more of the west and Europe. Mainly were just getting better at scheduling. Each band gets their time. And Jonathan, whos also in Engine Down and Denali, we have the same drive, so we rarely get on each others nerves. Weve known each other since kindergarten so its really easy for us to be like Were in this band, now were in this band. So far its been really easy and a lot of fun.

LOTD: How is it dealing with the different labels? You have two records on two different labels coming out within days of each other, and Im sure both labels want you to tour and support their record. Does that get stressful for you?

Keeley: It was when everything was coming down to the wire. Engine Down had a schedule where we were going to record and the album was going to come out at this time. With Denali, we had had these songs for a long time, and when we got signed to Jade Tree, we wanted to make sure we kept going with the buzz. You know, the buzz was kind of happening for us and we didnt want to screw that up. So it happened to be when we were recording, the release date was just going to be the same as the Engine Down record, so there wasnt any good scheduling there. And yeah, one label would be like Well maybe you should put that one off and the other label would be like Well, you should put that one off so they wouldnt come out at the same time. But with all the press and stuff between the two, they just had to fall like that. But both the labels are amazing. Im really glad were working with them because we have really great relationships with both labels and I could understand some of their worries and wanting us to tour as much as we can for both albums, but I think they can see our devotion. So we were worried at first but now I think Brian from Lovitt sees how much were dedicated to Engine Down and Tim [from Jade Tree] knows that were going to keep pursuing things with Denali. Im glad were on those two labels, like not a major and an indie, because that would just get ridiculous. Engine Down has been with Lovitt so long,

that were kind of a priority for the label, so Brian always has his hands in things and does as much as he can to help out, so that goes really well, and we have a lot of artistic freedom there too. And Jade Tree is helping as much as they can, with Denali being such a new band. So it totally works out, Im glad were on both labels.

LOTD: You talked about the buzz for Denali, which is huge for a band thats just been together for a little over a year. I read somewhere in a Richmond local paper about how theres starting to be a little bit of a backlash, and there was even a reference to the Strokes.

Keeley: Oh yeah, I remember that. Well hell yeah, we were way over-hyped in Richmond. We were in every paper in Richmond. And this was our hometown. I can understand Richmond creating the buzz, because theres kind of been a similar scene going on there for a while, and I think we were finally something new to come out of it. So all the news just latched on to us, and everyone wanted to do it and it happened all at the same time. So it was just too much. I dont want people to think that were pushing our band at anyone, but whatever.

LOTD: How is it being in a band with your sister?

Keeley: Ive wanted to be in a band with her for a long time. All throughout high school Jonathan and I were in bands together and she would be listening and I dont know how she could stand it. She always took piano lessons and voice lessons. She always took lessons, where we never did. She never really expressed an interest in being in a band. And then I went off to college and we were separated for a while and when I moved back to Richmond and she transferred from Greensboro back to Richmond and then we started getting closer. She had been writing songs all throughout high school, and I didnt even know that until one time I came home with a four-track and my mom told me she had been writing some songs. So I just told her, Mom told me youve been writing some songs, why dont we record some of them? And she just did this piano song and we threw down some vocals and a harmony on the first try and I was completely blown away. It was really what I was into at the time. Wed been into the same type of music for a while and she took it up a level. She ended up writing some more songs and she gave me a tape. When I listened I just wanted to work with her so badly. Finally we had a practice session and it all just worked out.



Denali

LOTD: When would you say Denali came together and became an actual band?

Keeley: It was in March sometime of 2000. Our first show was in Baltimore actually. We had a scheduled first show in Richmond at this little bar, but actually our first show happened because Engine Down had a weekend of shows scheduled, but Jason, [Engine Downs] bass player, on the way to our first show got appendicitis. We were like Oh my God. We were playing a show with this band called Sweep The Leg Johnny and I didnt want to give up the show, so I called Maura who was at home with our parents and said Maura, do you just want to start early? And she was already nervous about our first show, shed never even been in a band before. So we went up to Baltimore and we played the whole weekend with Denali. I was kind of nervous about the Engine Down fans who came out to see us, but they all were really into it.

LOTD: Yeah, I was going to ask you about the fans since half of Engine Down is in Denali. Its a similar sound, but very different too. Do the two bands have the same fan base? Does it transfer very well?

Keeley: I think it transfers well from Engine Down fans to Denali. Denali breaks out a little bit more than Engine Down because its a little bit more acceptable by people who dont even really know anything about music. I mean, she just has a pretty voice. They see that and its easy for them to latch on to that. And Ive been noticing now some Denali fans who have become aware of Engine Down and became fans that way, so its really cool. Denali actually just played a show with three grind-core bands and it worked out surprisingly well.

LOTD: You recorded the Denali record with Alan Weatherhead and Mark Linkous [both from Sparklehorse]. How was it working with those guys?

Keeley: It was amazing. I actually didnt know much about Mark Linkous. I had heard about Sparklehorse, but I hadnt really gotten into it and knew what it was about.

LOTD: Is he as weird in person as his music makes him out to be?

Keeley: *[laughs]* Yeah, hes sort of an odd character. Hes the quiet genius type. Mark Linkous was working in the studio in town and he got a copy of one of our demos and seemed interested. So we were like, OK, lets give it a try. So when we got signed to Jade Tree, we were like Well lets do two songs with Mark Linkous and just try it out, and we paid for it ourselves just to try it. And he was just amazing. Were really into experimental ways of recording things with atmospheric backgrounds and he was just on it before I could even think of it. Can we have the drums sound like theyre in a tin? and he would just be on it, setting up homemade microphones and it was done. Alan also had really great ideas. Everyday, I would just be like I dont even remember doing that. When did he add tremolo to that? It sounds amazing.

LOTD: The last time I saw both Engine Down and Denali was last year, right here at Macroock. How would you say both bands have grown in that time?

Keeley: Engine Down has a lot more experience. Weve toured a lot, so were much more in tune with each other. Denali I think we all know our part in the band much better now. Each time we come back to practice, even after a month, it just snaps together really quickly. It seems like Engine Down is a little more organic and were hoping were all in the right mood and will be working well together that day. Where as with Denali, we know the formula and we know the technical aspect of it, so it makes it easier in my mind to know that I can form these two things.

LOTD: As the primary songwriter for Engine Down, is it hard for you to step back in Denali and let Maura have that role?

Keeley: Its amazing. On the last *Demure* album, I was really into the rhythm of the record. I worked a lot with Cornbread, our drummer, just me and him working the song out. So with Denali, Jonathan and I would work together with bass and drums it was very relaxing. Its almost easier. I got to work with things I knew almost nothing about, like keyboards. Yeah, its fun experimenting. I like working with my sister too.

-Interview by Louis Miller