

CHRIS BALLEW NEEDS his beauty rest. He didn't get it on the tour bus. "I'm in one of those moods where my hands are foreign objects, and I'm knocking things over," says the lead singer and guitarist for the Presidents of the United States of America. "Gravity is my enemy."

Catching up with the Presidents on the first leg of their spring tour was easy. Keeping the singer awake wasn't. The overnight trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles was a little tough for Ballew because he didn't sleep a wink. But on this day, he was committed — shackled — to a full afternoon of media blitz.

Ballew sat at an over-dressed round table in the dining room of the Hollywood Franklin Hotel. Technically, it was high noon. But it clearly felt like 4 a.m. to Ballew. The interview stalled while the Columbia Records rep rounded up the rest of the trio.

Ballew winced when drummer Jason Finn — who slept like a baby to the hum of the diesel engine — showed up for the interview bright-eyed and bushy-haired.

And when Dave Dederer, the bass guitarist, and Craig Montgomery, the road manager, also checked in with a full night of sleep, Ballew was completely annoyed.

"I guess everyone else slept great, which makes me feel even better," Ballew says sarcastically. "I'll have Jason clock me in the face right before I go to sleep [next time]. He just has a six-pack and then wakes up feeling fine."

Un-glam rock

This mellow yet mildly peeved attitude isn't what you'd expect

from a guy who makes a mint singing about animals and fruit in a super-charged stage show. But the truth is he's just a regular guy. All three of the Presidents are just regular guys with a knack for playing the most gleeful rock out there.

Known for wacky songs like "Kitty," "Lump," "Boll Weevil" and "Peaches" and lyrics that make you tongue-tied, the Presidents have taken the United States by storm with their oddly equipped band.

Ballew plays a two-string guitar. Dederer wails on a three-string bass and Jason Finn's drum kit is a little sparse with 10-inch splash cymbals instead of the traditional 16- or 18-inch rock crashes. But it's all part of their playfulness as entertainers.

This Seattle trio has broken out of the grunge mold with its off-beat frolic rock and has kicked the notion that you have to be angst-ridden to write good music.

Columbia nabbed these guys after hearing their self-titled debut album, recorded by PopLlama. Without delay, Columbia signed them, remastered the album and has since sold more than 2 million copies. At press time, they were on *Billboard's* top 10 list.

The name game

Primary this, State of the Union that. So it's an election year. That's not their fault. The political references when writing or talking about the Presidents are tireless. Was it on purpose? Was it a big marketing scheme? A flirtatious gesture of patriotism?

Nah. They're just regular guys.

LIKE 'EM OR REM LUMP IT

Waking up with the Presidents of the United States of America

BY TRICIA LAINE
ASSISTANT EDITOR

"It doesn't have anything to do with what we think about or who we are," Ballew says. "Which is kind of stupid on our part."

Finn grimaces at talk of the parallels. "It's kind of sad that this is an election year as far as our notoriety goes," he says. "It's just this long name. It's totally stupid."

But that ridiculously clunky name played a big part in getting them a gig to play for President Clinton in 1994. And that's nothing to scoff at — unless you're like Dederer, who's scoffing.

"We do everything democratically, and there's dissent among the ranks about the merit of exploiting the name," Ballew says when Dederer's not around to defend his position.

Poorly planned, maybe. But brilliantly executed for a band that ends most of its shows with a rendition of "We're Not Going to Make It" — a song about failing as a rock band.

Star struck

"Everybody wants to be naked and famous," or so one of their songs goes. But did they really expect to reach the kind of fame they're relishing now?

Before the question is fully asked, Ballew interrupts with: "No, no, no, ah nope, no..." as if the mere idea is absurd.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword," he says. "I always thought that a combination of people would just kind of come along, and it would work. It was like a patience thing — just waiting."

Ballew and Dederer have known each other since their junior high days in Seattle but didn't play

together until after high school. And then they only paired up when they were home visiting from college — Ballew from the State University of New York at Purchase and Dederer from Brown U. in Rhode Island.

Eventually they both ended up back in Seattle, where they formed the Presidents. Finn joined them from Love Battery — a popular Seattle band he played with for seven years.

"My parents are delicious, actually — with relief, I think," Finn says of his family's support for his music career. He mimics their attitude — past and present: "Well OK, if you're sure you want to do that. We're behind you." Now it's like, "YES!"

Stage bright

"Like Pontiac, we build excitement," Dederer says about the band's main goal — to entertain.

"I think right now performing is my favorite," Dederer says. Although he professes a love of being holed up alone with his guitar, he's still a stage man. And he shares the stage with two other hams — even Finn can be seen grinning at the audience from behind the smaller-than-usual drum set.

The Presidents play with the crowd, sing with the crowd, do their own renditions of cover songs like the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" and even throw in some Van Halen-esque, arena-rock songs — just for fun.

"You can go up on stage and be insane," Ballew says.

A true lover of fun, Ballew is always innovating ideas for entertaining. "[My wife] is going to make me a strap-on mohawk for a couple of songs." It'll be worn like a bicycle helmet, he says. "I can't wait to get my hands on it."

If you've seen them live, you know they put on an intensely fun show. And the whole time, they're just regular guys.

Tricia Laine, an assistant editor at U. Magazine, wants her own strap-on hairdo

Photos courtesy of Columbia Records



The Presidents are feather pluckn good.



"We're just some guys," says Chris Ballew.