

the spirit

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It hit me somewhere over Oklahoma, on the flight to Louisville. Tracing the scars that our ravenous heaping ant farm of civilization has gnashed through the great terra of the contiguous states, following their crooked stabs and flattened lifelines backwards from Los Angeles toward the Atlantic, I had a realization. If the human organism is indeed something singular, grand and ravenous, then the mess that I was staring at beneath me must be its exposed guts, somehow sup- planted onto the geographic floor. The

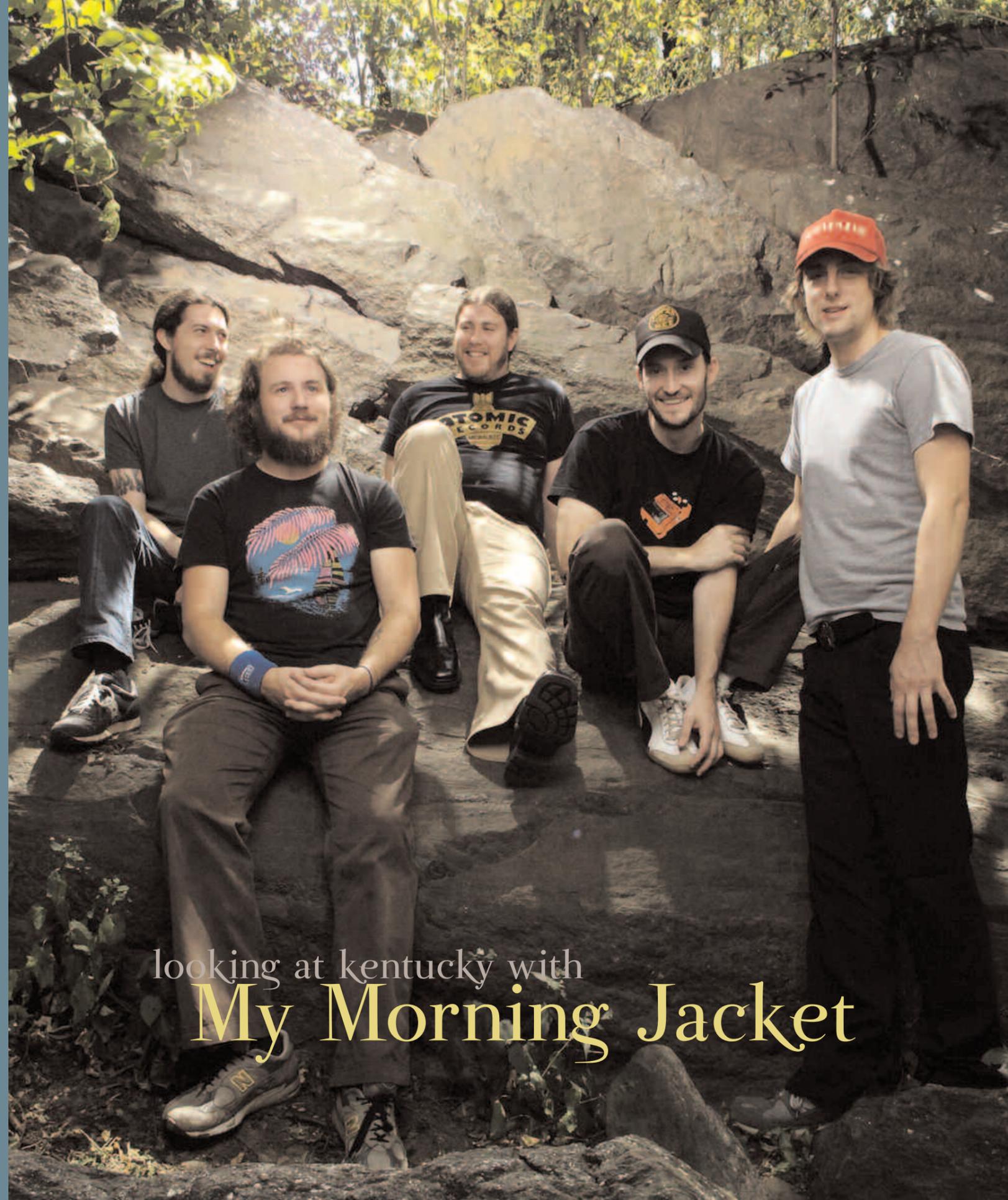
The state is quintessential Americana wrapped in weird paper and tied up with a bourbon-flavored bow. Colonel Harland Sanders, Jim Bowie, Muhammad Ali, fuck- ing George Clooney, Hunter S. Thompson and his beautiful freak protégé John Christopher Depp II. The first settlement on Kentucky land was christened Boonesborough, as in the borough founded by Boone, Daniel; and the state's principal exports are some of the world's finest, most enduring vices: tobacco, booze and marijuana. Neither North nor South (Abe Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were born within a year and 100 miles of one another somewhere out there in the bluegrass), and not quite Midwest, the state is a split-hair- on-a-knife-blade balance of progressive thought, revered tradition and peculiar niceness. And as such, it is a prime candi- date for Beating Heart of the Civilized World. The fact that the radio in my rental car was somehow pre-tuned to Elvis Presley's "Kentucky Rain" when I turned

the key in the ignition only confirmed my uneducated theory. Th-thump. Th-thump. The story of My Morning Jacket begins on the I-71 artery, halfway to the node called Cincinnati, in 1997. Jim James and his cousin Johnny Quaid were driving the easy two hours northeast to see Tina Turner, as sponsored by Hanes Her Way. Quaid was a damn good guitarist with a reel-to-reel; James was a singer and a songwriter with bigger hopes than his band at the time (Month of Sundays). He'd recorded several of his own demos to tape, and chose this auspicious night to reveal them to a potential partner-to- be. With a hairy grin and crossed fingers, he popped in the cassette, waited for that first chord to strike, then sat back to bask in the hissy reverb. And Johnny, with all the nonchalance of a sticky summer day in Louisville, brushed his hair from his face, nodded his head, and uttered the three words that gave birth to My Morning Jacket: "I like those."

biggest cities are the organs, of course, and the smaller ones various satellites of the lymphatic system. Roads, highways, byways, flyways...these are the blood vessels, ferrying the vitals back and forth between pumping outposts in a giant game of cellular com- merce. And if this creature truly does exist, and all of these cities are organs and the interstates veins, then where on humankind's good gray earth is the giant fucking spurting vena cava? Why in Kentucky, of course.

The silo is now the stuff of legends. Out on the Quaid family commune in Shelbyville, James found his calling— specifically the timbre of it—in a 60-foot- tall cylinder designed to hold corn. Quaid had built an analog studio into the white walls of his grandparents' farmhouse and the crumbling grain silo next door made the perfect reverb chamber for James' fan- tastic croon. For four years, this would be the dirt-floored base of My Morning Jacket's various incarnations (originally James, Quaid, bassist Two-Tone Tommy and drummer J. Glenn; later to include keyboardist Danny Cash and current drummer Patrick Hallahan), and for three albums (their country-gothic debut *The Tennessee Fire*, the inimitably haunting *At Dawn*, and the one that introduced them to us, *It Still Moves*), the family ghosts cluttered in the rafters would pick up James' cry and send it back two hundred-fold, rattling the leftover crumbs wedged in between the loosening two-by-fours.

left the silo



looking at kentucky with
My Morning Jacket

my Morning Jacket have a new album. It's called *Z*. It's the first recorded outside of the silo, outside of Kentucky, and yet it's as Kentucky as anything they'll ever do. It's their darkest record yet. It's their most fun record yet. And it's goddamned good. But we'll get to that. Driving the I-71 artery from Louisville International to my temporary home out in the suburb of Crestwood, it's clear that there's some kind of strangeness out here. The freeway is next to empty and so is the sky—huge and desolate aside from a few flat, stretching clouds. There are trees all around, curling their cluttered branches wide as if to hug the great nothing up above. And as the sun heads for the horizon, the great nothing only gets bigger, and the Kentucky heart beats hotter and more humid. A mile from my bed, the fog gets so thick I have to pull off and wait it out.

"There's just some dark, black magic about Louisville that nobody really understands," says James. It's daylight again, thankfully, about 2:00 in the afternoon. I slept at an old roommate's folks' place, restless in the sickly glow of the Jefferson County Ford truck plant. The band and I had eaten breakfast in Old Louisville, now we're sitting in the skylit conservatory of the Galt House hotel. "One of my friends says he'd like to think it's because there are trees everywhere. We would talk about it, imagining this big, weird forest where they chopped parts of it out and put houses in and now we're sitting in the woods with all of these spirits and things that will never leave. They inhabit our bodies and inhabit our thoughts in ways that we could never imagine."

A round of Kentucky bourbons on the rocks and we (myself, James, Two-Tone, Hallahan and new guitarist Carl Broemel) are all warming up inside of the air-conditioning. The Galt's been razed to the ground and rebuilt twice in its 175-year tenure next to the Ohio River. Dickens presumably worked on *A Christmas Carol* here during his stay in 1842. And 22 years later, Generals Grant and Sherman planned the Union's ruinous "March to the Sea" from the original building's decadent innards. My Morning Jacket...well, they partied here back before they were old enough to drink (but wise enough to know the benefits of a well-concealed flask). Outside the humidity is at a balls-curling, three-summer high, thanks to a tempestuous bitch named

Elizabeth. Earlier this morning, from the colorful tables of the Third Street Café, we watched locals shuffle by slowly under the heavy air, surrounded by the enormous red-bricked houses and nearly two-century-old stone gothic steeples of America's largest Victorian neighborhood. A block away, in all that heat and history, was the house that My Morning Jacket rented to write *Z*.

"I never thought about what Louisville was or what Kentucky was before because we were just from here," says James, through a soft Southern drawl more Owen Wilson than Jed Clampett. He's wearing a shredded Skynyrd shirt. "And I always considered myself a really progressive liberal freak, and I am mentally, but I never realized that I have an accent and we kinda look outwardly like we're from Kentucky. I didn't realize it until we started going out on tours and doing interviews. We are from Kentucky—we embody it."

The band's reputation for beards and hair past their shoulders (alternately, chops and ponytails) precedes them, and aside from the newbie, they don't disappoint. The ride over to the hotel was a post-modern collision of the highest order. Cruising in James' old Grand Wagoneer with the windows down, we were five hairy white boys nodding our heads to the sticky bump of Common's latest. The collective amiability of the band could make even the most-straight journalist slouch. And while James does have the personality of a frontman—he's the talker, the brooder, the thinker, the leader—it's only by a whisker. An interview with My Morning Jacket can quickly turn into a mushy thing punctuated by the great recurring Southern Stoop "Yup." A day of activities with the band could just as easily mean a lazy tour of their hometown as a 12-hour session of Nintendo Ice Hockey and bong rips.

But they've earned every toke. Since they've had a reason to tour, My Morning Jacket have hardly been home except to record. Their debut LP found freak success in the Netherlands (they'd played about dozen shows total, only one outside of Louisville, before they were flown out to the hundreds of clamoring Dutch waiting for them in Amsterdam), and their raucous festival appearances led to slots opening for Guided By Voices, Doves and Foo Fighters. Now they headline around the world when they're not sharing the bill with our modern legends of the arena (most recently they had the honor of upstaging Wilco). They're a touring band through and through, Southern rock gods with flying manes and amps with dials

that go past 11. It was all too much for Cash and Quaid (the family life was calling), so in came Broemel and keyboardist Bo Koster (who still lives in L.A.). Aptly, they were thrown out onto the road straight away to become a part of the hustle and bustle of a million-billion blood vessels racing back and forth across the grand old body organic.

I think each thing only has its magic for a certain period of time and it was just gone at the farm," says James. With the whiskey working its own magic in our guts, we decided to move our operations over to Indiana for the best ice cream either side of the Ohio—just a quick drive over that famous bridge where in a fit of racial angst, a 19-year-old Cassius Clay hurled his Olympic gold medal into the river. "After we finished *It Still Moves*, we felt like we had milked that place...we'd rung it dry. Whenever we would go out there to practice afterwards it was just so depressing. The spirit was gone."

"It was like standing in a ghost town," says Hallahan, sharing a dilapidated wicker loveseat with Broemel. He's the only other real talker of the group. Tommy and James have their legs kicked out at a table to my left—more rotting basket weave—and the whole lot of us are gazing over dead-eyed onto the river. From the second-story deck of the Widow's Walk Ice Cream Shop (a lonely old place on the wrong side of the flood wall), the first breeze of the day is greeted with round of slow nods. This is, indeed, the life. But James can't sit still for too long. There's a "For Sale" sign out front and the possibility of a rehearsal space with a built-in ice cream business is too tempting. He goes inside to make the call while our four minds are left to graze the landscape.

There's a Lewis Carroll poem called *Phantasmagoria*. The author, a hapless sap with poor taste in wine, comes home from work one night expecting to find his normal lonely life, and instead discovers a sad phantom who's been assigned the duty of haunting the apartment (which had gone ghostless long past the allotted time). Offended at the intrusion, the author tries to force the phantom out using logic. But after pages and pages of rhyming touchés, the ghost suddenly realizes that it has come to the wrong

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address. It leaves with little adieu, and the author is left all alone with his cheap wine and his tears and his useless wit. The moral, of course, is that you can't reason with a spirit. It's there or it's not, but crying about it won't do a damn thing.

James returns moments later looking like a beaten child—the asking price for the shop is 500 grand, too much for a building that looks like a gingerbread house. But everybody knows spirits are better than sweets any day. And as such, when the silo gave up the ghost, it was time to move on. In keeping with their Kentucky heritage (as the Good Doctor said, “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.”), My Morning Jacket packed up the farmhouse, moved to a rented Victorian amongst the shadows of households torn asunder in the middle of a Civil War, then made for the Catskills. For a month they lived and recorded in Allaire Studios in Upstate New York, a 1920s mansion that sits on top of its own mountain overlooking Woodstock, isolated except for whatever was in the air and their producer (another first), John Leckie (ex-Abbey Road in-house engineer; he's worked with three-fourths of the Beatles, Pink Floyd, New Order, the Stone Roses and Radiohead to name a few). And after 30 days of heavy reverb and pounding drums and Ice Hockey and fireworks fights and takes and retakes of that live My Morning Jacket magic up there in the Fried Serotonin Synapses of the Civilized World, the band emerged with *Z*.

“I've always wanted to make music or make art that everyone can enjoy,” says James, sitting again, tipping

back in the busted chair. The man has a highly publicized obsession with children's stories, and when he's about to talk about Muppets, his eyes light up like Kentucky fireflies. “That's why Jim Henson was a genius: if you watch *The Muppet Show* now, there's so much great stuff there still that you loved when you were a child. Same thing with classic Disney movies...there's always something kind of weird, a thread of darkness, that tricks parents' brains into really sitting there and enjoying something with their kids. I would love to think that our music is that broad. It's more of an adult thing, but some time in my life I'd like to get to the point of making art or film or music or whatever that was like that...something that you get into like a good book.”

Z is the most expansive, colorful, freaky and fuck-all imaginative album that My Morning Jacket have recorded. There's “Wordless Chorus,” the sprawling opener as pretty and wide as the Louisville sky. There's “It Beats for You” with its dusky beat and rolling bass and James' croon recalling the spook of Blonde Redhead's *Amedeo Pace*. The crystalline “Gideon” almost sounds like a Coldplay song, and “Off the Record” might be the first true Southern reggae jam. “Into the Woods” is an eerie march through the forest set to the pace of a carnival organ as the pedal steel plays the slide whistle, and on the slinky closer “Dondante,” James wails like a specter himself. The echoes, the murky melodies, the playful sounds, everything sounding big, all of the spirits that came and went along the way, James' *Fantasia* fetish (and

Dickens' and Lewis' and Henson's and, er, Wayne Coyne's), and that darkness at the bloody beating heart of all things...it's all part of the fantastically weird place that My Morning Jacket inhabit, embody and perpetuate.

“We've met people from all over now and I still think Kentucky has the biggest freaks in the world.” We're at the Frankfort Beer Depot (known by the natives as Beerhalla!), at the end of our day together, and James' sentimentality is growing with each buck-fifty beer. There's an industrial-sized BBQ smoker out front, a minigolf course around the back, and on the televisions overhead, ESPN's World's Strongest Man contest has captured the attention of the usual handful of heavy-gutted patrons. “It's magic, because there's something...I was talking about it with somebody the other day. You have this Southern tradition and Southern pride, but you also have this Northern progressive thought and art and strangeness, and all this stuff is constantly melding together. Especially in a place like Louisville. It's a big city, but it's not too big. It's perfectly in the middle of all thought of all the universe of anything that's ever happened.”

Hell, why not? This late in the night, James may not make the best case for Kentucky's queer magnetism, but he doesn't need to—it runs thick in the muggy air. In another 24 hours, My Morning Jacket will be flying to Japan—for now, though, we stay up with the ghosts and listen to the sound of the Southern range. Shhh...real quiet now. Do you hear it? Th-thump. Th-thump. **F**

“We are from Kentucky—we embody it.”