

Judah & the Lion

THIS ROCK TRIO FROM NASHVILLE IS GIVING THE WORLD
A “PEP TALK” AND BRINGING FANS TOGETHER WITH AN
ENCOURAGING MESSAGE OF LOVE AND HOPE.

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It was Judah's junior year at Belmont University in Nashville. He didn't see a future in baseball, which to this point had been the focus of his college career. He hadn't mustered the confidence needed to pursue his love of music, but Judah had a vision of a banjo and mandolin—a certain sound that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Judah's roommate suggested he get in touch with a banjo player named Nate. Nate recommended they also include Brian, a mandolin player he'd recently met. The three of them gathered for a jam session in December of 2011, and Judah left that day inspired, ready to push for something more than he'd ever pushed before.

That jam session was not only the beginning of a story of merged lives, friendships formed, and music created, but it also helped Judah put his finger on that certain sound. "I've found the sound I'm supposed to bring to the world!" he told his mom, who had encouraged him to pursue his passion for songwriting.

Brian and Nate were all in too—eventually. "I could tell they were excited about the songwriting I was doing at the time, even though they came into it a little skeptical," he laughs, remembering that he was a baseball jock.

A group of students putting a band together is not uncommon at Belmont, which is known for its music programs, but these guys were ready to fight for success that would last beyond college. They named their band Judah & the Lion and continually pushed out new music to keep the momentum going.





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As the band grew stronger over the next few years, other areas of Judah's life felt as though they were crashing down. He watched his parents struggle and then split up after years of marriage. He witnessed the crushing effects of alcoholism in loved ones. "I felt so defenseless to it all. As a performer, you have to keep up a certain level of, 'I'm doing OK' and 'I've got it all together.'" You can hear the pain in his voice as he recalls the feelings that surfaced while he wrote. It's no surprise that writing music is Judah's way of processing life's circumstances. He describes his songs as pouring

all those feelings on the table in a helpless admission that he doesn't know what to do with them all. "What I thought my life would look like, it doesn't look like anymore," he says.

As the band began work on its third album, Judah admits, "I didn't really have a plan. I was just trying to write songs--kind of selfishly, I guess--that would help me process things in a healthier way than by turning to other things or growing angry," Judah says. He had no intention of sharing them with the world.

After playing one of the songs in soundcheck, a dear

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friend approached him afterward to tell him it was one of the most beautiful songs she'd ever heard. "Thank you, but I don't think I'll ever release it. It's just too personal," he told her. She insisted he release it. Brian and Nate agreed, followed by the band's entire tight community of friends.

In the studio, Judah realized this record wasn't just music—it was a story. He says he can't take credit for it; he was just writing music that was helping him. Hard times look different for everyone, but the feelings that surface can be the same. As they recorded this album, Judah realized the common thread, the message that would tie these songs together with a string of hope. The album got its name—*Pep Talks*—through the message that surfaced as the team put it together.

"There's this pressure that we put on ourselves, as human beings, that we have to have it all together," he says. At the risk of being vulnerable, Judah & the Lion hope this record grants permission to their ever-growing audience to take off the mask.

With lyrics such as, "I guess you're just broken. I guess you're just hopin' for more. I guess you're just reachin'. I guess you're just in need of love. You're not alone. You're not alone in this," the album reminds us that pain surrounds us in this world; no one is immune to it. If we all stop acting like we're OK, maybe we'll see we're not alone. Maybe we'll be able to help each other heal.

"As a band we want to put out this message that whether you're going through an amazing season of life or one of

the worst seasons of life, feel the lows and feel the highs and know that you have a reason to move forward," Judah encourages. "At the end of the day, know that you are beautiful and your life is worth living, no matter what you're going through."

I'd say that's one of the best "pep talks."

In a generation that tends to linger in the storm, sometimes in anger and depression, Judah says he wants to linger in the story that life is hard, but also to communicate that you're going to come out on the better side and be stronger for it. "Our vision for the band is to bring people together and inspire hope," he says.

Listening to this record, it's impossible not to relate to the feelings that surface during hard times—or to remember good times, such as in "Queen Songs." "In a negative world, we want to bring a positive energy and light," says Judah. With a message that hits the core of every human, *Pep Talks* gives us permission to let our weaknesses show and also lets us know there is strength in community.

Pep Talks drops this summer, but this time it's different. This record is more personal than ever before. With a title like that, and a pep rally-themed tour, you may be surprised at the raw and real message behind this new album.

Judah, Nate, and Brian look back and wonder how it all happened—from a baseball field to a meeting in the Belmont cafeteria. A story that seemed disjointed turned out to be something meant to be. ■

For more on how Judah & the Lion spreads love and hope while on tour, check out "High Five Squad" on page 52.