

Paradise Fears members conquer steep learning curve and have never looked back

By David Lias

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"Born in the heartland and bred in front of a microphone, the future holds promise for the Paradise Fears boys, so mothers, warn your daughters!"

Those are the words of Jay Escobar-Haskins, an album reviewer for Rawkzilla.com, speaking about the Vermillion-based pop rock band shortly after their first full-length album, Yours Truly, debuted in 2011.

That album was released approximately a year after the six band members – four of which graduated together in 2010 from Vermillion High School – decided to forego the familiar path leading to higher education after receiving their diplomas. They opted instead to try a much-less traveled route leading to a world of rock and roll music, recording, touring, and building a fan base.

It is a decision that, so far, is paying off for Paradise Fears members Cole Andre, Marcus Sand, Jordan Merrigan, Sam Miller, Lucas Zimmerman and Michael Walker.

The band's latest album, Battle Scars, released in June 2013, had, by August, climbed to #19 on the iTunes Chart, and #2 in the alternative rock format.

The website "Alter the Press!" offers this review, written by Gina Catalano:

"Who needs a record label when you can make a successful record on your own? Paradise Fears certainly doesn't. In less than a day they were able to climb the iTunes chart in both alternative and overall with their brand-new EP, Battle Scars, proving that this band is ready and capable of taking over the world single handedly.

The eight tracks that make up Battle Scars range from the classic sound of Paradise Fears ('Battle Scars') to a newer pop sound ('Lullaby') and a touch of R&B ('Fought for Me'). If that isn't good enough, there's even a surprise in the last track, 'Battle Scars (Reprise)'. (Spoiler alert: It's Brian

Dales of The Summer Set.) (Second spoiler alert: It's great.)

The intro sets the tone for the EP, setting forth the remaining tracks that make you proud to be a fan of these six guys from South Dakota. The dedication and hard work gone into this album can literally be heard in every note, every line. The strong presence of the variety of instruments and inspirational lyrics helps the record tell its story, which is a powerful one. The different sounds illustrate that this record has no set genre – which can either be taken as the band isn't sure who they want to be or that they can pull off any genre they'd try. From the reaction of its audience, it's definitely the latter of the two. This band has been able to pull off everything they've tried and with the support of their fans there's nothing they can't do."

The reviewer of the group's latest recordings touched on something that their parents, watching and listening from afar here in Vermillion, agree with – these six young men know how to work hard.

They've also proven the ability to work smart as well. They have so far navigated the tricky, unknown journey into professional music well, charting a path that appears to be leading to success.

Sam's father, Steve Miller of Vermillion, along with the parents of the other five young men, have watched that journey from day one.

"We had no idea at the moment," he said, talking about whether the young men would find success or would wind up struggling. "I feel like all of us gave them our blessings to give it a shot, to see where it played out."

"When they first talked about it, there was just genuine concern that I think all the parents would naturally have," said Michael's dad, Lanny Walker of Vermillion. "It was replaced with a real amazement about how dedicated these guys have been and how seriously they are taking their work.



Members of Paradise Fears are Cole Andre, Marcus Sand, Sam Miller, Michael Walker, Jordan Merrigan, and Lucas Zimmerman.

(Photo courtesy of Paradise Fears)

I think they are enjoying it, but they aren't being blasé about it – they are really taking it seriously, and they are really working hard at it."

"I don't think any of us could have predicted that four years later they would have come as far as they have," Steve said. "I think it's amazing and wonderful and a testament to their perseverance and hard work. They are a bunch of hard working boys."

The band members' parents may not have necessarily known everything about the music business as Paradise Fears set out to make its mark. They knew, however, that it wouldn't be easy.

Most importantly, Cole, Marcus, Jordan, Sam, Lucas, and Michael also knew they had not chosen an easy path.

"They understood the business side of it, the idea that they were going to have to work hard, that this wasn't going to be easy at all," Steve said. "They made some pretty creative choices, and they kind of take care of each other in that way. It's been amazing."

Lanny, too, is a bit astonished by the niche the young men have been able to carve in the music industry in such a short time.

"I had always hoped that they would find their niche, but it's actually bigger than that," he said, pointing out that besides

recordings, the young musicians have also created videos of several of their songs that can easily be viewed on YouTube.

The video of their song "Sanctuary," which was filmed in the United Church of Christ – Congregational in Vermillion, has been viewed over half a million times.

"The amazing thing is there wasn't any guidance. They didn't have any direction from anybody on how to set up these shows," Lanny said. "There are a lot of little things – where are we staying, how are we getting there – organizing everything, the when and the where and the times – they've done that all themselves."

The decision to allow Sam to pursue music rather than higher education after high school was made with little difficulty, Steve said. "Sam had talked about both possibilities a lot in his senior year; he applied to colleges, got accepted by some good colleges, had received some good scholarships – all that good stuff. I think the hardest moment was when he actually had to decide, and I think that was much harder for him."

"I think Jill (Tyler, Sam's mom) and I had always said that we were going to trust him to do what he needed to do and what his heart was telling him to do, and when he finally decided, it was hard

in some ways for him to let go of going to college as much as it was for us, because I think he would have been great in college. As a parent, at that point, I trusted Sam and so he made that choice and has really never looked back."

"It's safe to say there was some genuine concern," Lanny said, when asked about how he and his wife, Vicki dealt with that turning point in all of their lives. "All of the band members were good students, and really had a nice path laid out for them for college. We weren't sure what type of dedication they were going to have when they first started talking about doing this, and they started talking about this early on (their senior year).

"But then, we started witnessing their dedication to it ... these kids really worked hard at this, and were just extremely motivated to do well," he said. "It has been anything but them taking this lightly. They've taken this very seriously."

Steve said he is learning more and more about today's music industry, and notes that all six band members have studied the ins and outs of this field thoroughly.

"Part of their success has been, I think, their loyalty to their friends. In this day and age, with social media, they stay connected with e-mails and texts and twitter and all of that kind of stuff.

They are able to maintain a really good relationship with their fans. They work hard to create relationships that will allow them to continue to do well," he said. "Their marketing strategy is to try to be really good, to listen to their fans, and they've been able to learn how to get to know their audience better and find ways to develop more fans in different areas of the country."

"I think some people think you just get up and sing on Friday night. Well, they do, but what you see on Friday night is just one piece of a lot of work that week to get there," Steve said.

Lanny noted that he had just talked with Michael the night before. The six young men are hard at work, writing and perfecting songs for their next CD that they plan to release later this year.

"Things have changed so much in the music world," he said. "You used to sign with a record label – basically you had to interview for a label, get signed on, and basically the label takes the production reigns and all of those kinds of things."

Paradise Fears hasn't signed with a major record label, in part because the band wants to maintain a bit of independence.

"I think they could have (signed with a major label), but they want to manage their own destiny, which I think is very interesting," Steve said.

"Last night, Michael said all six of them are together, in this house in Minneapolis. They've got a recording studio in the basement, and they are just pumping out the songs right now," Lanny said. "They feel like they are getting some really good ones. This group of kids, for whatever reason, when they get together it seems they can do some really good things."

"They haven't gone to college, but they have been learning the whole time. They have been learning the business, and in some ways they've gotten a college education. It's just in a very different and a very practical way," Steve said.



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