

Sound that knocks you down, gives you a lift

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Take a good look at the buildings around the DeKalb County Fairgrounds in Auburn.

They might not all be standing when the fair's first big-time rock concert ends, two months from now on the night of Sept. 28.

Well known for its country concerts, the fair is partnering for the first time with FM radio station 98.9 The Bear as a concert sponsor. The station chose rising rock stars EGYPT CENTRAL to headline the first show.

"The reason we did the fair is it's the first time we could play for all ages," said Mark O'Toole, the band's manager. The band usually plays in places off limits to people under 21.

"It's cool to be able to come and play at the fair and give the kids here a cool show," said JOHN FALLS, the group's lead singer.

The band may appeal to young people, but its self-described biggest fan comes from an older generation.

"The show is so fantastic. They just appeal to everybody," said Jacque Gould, assistant manager at Fire Mountain restaurant in Auburn. "You have to see them in person. They are fantastic. Every song has a meaning. Every song gets to you."

Gould owns Grade A Tattoos in Fort Wayne and met the band members when they played at Piere's night club next door. That's why the band stopped at Fire Mountain for supper on a swing through the Midwest earlier this month.

Outfitted in the required uniform for hard-rocking musicians — all-black clothing, outlandish hair and enough tattoos to make Gould's cash register play "Stairway to Heaven" — EGYPT CENTRAL projected an intimidating attitude. All show. The musicians turned out to be thoughtful and engaging young men.

They were a long way from home, but that turns out to be Memphis, Tenn. — not Egypt. The band's name comes from a road in Memphis that runs through the tough part of town.

"It was a way to not be able to deny our roots, ever," said bass guitar player JOEY CHICAGO, who carries his own hometown in his stage name.

Fort Wayne is fast becoming a second home to the band. Their audio guru hails from Fort Wayne. So does a music industry executive who has taken them under his wing. Test markets for their song, "Over and Under," included Memphis, Tallahassee, Fla., and Fort Wayne, and it brought an enthusiastic response on The Bear.

"People love rock music in this part of the country," Chicago said.

"It's a big deal when radio decides to take a chance on a band, especially a young band. The Bear took a chance on us," Falls said.

EGYPT CENTRAL has been together since 2001, and the band is finally "getting to the very beginning of where we want to be," said drummer BLAKE ALLISON. But success wouldn't be sweet without a struggle, the band members say.

Listen carefully behind the hammering beat, and the lyrics are "putting a real message across that really has something to say," Falls said.

"We realize just how important your role is as a musician," Chicago said about the band's responsibility. "If you don't take it seriously, you're leading people astray."

Taking responsibility seriously would seem to run a risk of getting you thrown out of the black-clad musicians' club, but EGYPT CENTRAL wants to portray honesty and positive messages, the young men said.

"We want people to feel good about listening to our music and overcoming obstacles in life that can really slow you down," Chicago said.

Falls, the band's founder, added, "That's definitely the whole point of EGYPT CENTRAL."

If the sound doesn't knock you down on Sept. 28 in Auburn, maybe the lyrics will give you a lift.