

**I**t's a rainy, dreary afternoon in West Virginia and Tom Hamilton is having what can only be described as a rough day at the office. During Brothers Past's abbreviated, weather-delayed set at Masontown's All Good Festival, a construction accident cut the group's power mid-song, collapsing a portion of the stage and nearly injuring the band along the way. Backstage, as Hamilton recovers, laminate-ordained scenesters schmooze with hip bands like The Flaming Lips and Rose Hill Drive, all but ignoring Brothers Past and the excellent set of songs it performed before the mayhem. It's the type of day that could conceivably persuade a struggling young artist to give up the road life. But for Hamilton, it's just fodder for future writing.

"The Dead's songs weren't based around throwaway lyrics or someone talking about stupid, asinine stuff—their lyrics touched people," Hamilton says. "I remember being ten and getting the complete lyrics of Robert Hunter—all the guy's poetry. It was so special. I feel that if we are going to be part of this scene, I want to try and help fix it."

In the past five years, Brothers Past has blossomed into one of jamnation's great, song-oriented hopes.

But that wasn't always the case. Like many of its peers, Brothers Past's story began in college—Cabrini College—where keyboardist Tom McKee studied in the late 1990s. At the time, trance was the hippie-rock rage, with improv-oriented groups like the Disco Biscuits, Lake Trout and STS9 digging deeper into electronica, both onstage and in the studio. Along with his brother, Hamilton formed an electronic/jam combo called Brothers Past and booked a gig during Cabrini College's Spring Fling in 1998.

"I saw Tom and was just blown away," says McKee. "We wound up meeting later that night at a jazz club and started talking." Soon after, he joined the band.

Despite developing a strong following around Philadelphia, after two years the group began to splinter, leaving Hamilton and McKee to ponder Brothers Past's future. Ultimately, the duo decided to continue and, after six months of searching, settled on the new, airtight rhythm section of bassist Clay Parnell and drummer Rick Lowenberg, whose metronome timing has helped ground the group's dance-heavy style. Scoring a weekly residency at West Chester, PA's Rex's, Brothers Past developed its sound through traditional trial-by-fire methods.

"Our light guy learned how to do lights at Rex's and our sound guy was a taper who liked what we were doing," McKee says. "We needed a product to sell through Homegrown [Music Network], so we recorded our first album, *Elements*, basically live."

At first, Brothers Past was pegged as a "baby-Bisco" band, playing post-show parties and plugging its upcoming gigs through that band's message boards. McKee even penned the twice-aired Biscuit number "Loch Ness Monster" with Jon Gutwillig.

"It's unbelievably frustrating," says Hamilton of the Biscuit comparisons. "I mean, we're all friends with those guys. I play in Electron with Marc [Brownstein] and I play acoustic shows with Aron [Magner]. It's a product of our environment. We're both from Philadelphia and grew up in the same scene. Fine, we play 'four on the floor,' they play 'four on the floor.' They write compositions that I couldn't in a million years write. On the flip side, I write some songs they could never write."

By the time Brothers Past issued its sophomore release—the suite-like concept album *A Wonderful Day* in 2002—the group had a healthy dose of autonomy, thanks in part to the strength of Hamilton's songwriting. Along the way, Hamilton and McKee discovered Radiohead, The Postal Service and a bevy of other modern rock bands that utilized the same loops and laptops to enhance their compositions. Somewhat frustrated by the jamband stigma, Hamilton went to work on a new

**BROTHERS PAST**

by Mike Greenhaus

PHOTOS BY David Vann



**"Music doesn't have to be about picking a team and sticking with it."**

**Tom McKee**

*Geek Guide*

**Must Download:**

September 10, 2004  
 at Memorial Union  
 Terrace in Madison, WI

**Must Upload:**

"Too Late to Call" off  
*This Feeling's Called Goodbye*

**Must-Listen Side Project:**

Electron: *This is Electron* (2005)

**Brothers Past is**

Tom Hamilton (vocals, guitar, laptop),  
 Tom McKee (keyboards, vocals),  
 Clay Parnell (bass, vocals) and  
 Rick Lowenberg (drums).

batch of songs that found him marrying his electronic influences with more polished, indie-rock song structures.

Retreating inward, Brothers Past funneled its feelings into the studio, writing a chunk of the material which ended up on its most recent album, 2005's *This Feeling's Called Goodbye*. "A Wonderful Day is an album you listen to from front to back," Hamilton says. "So we tried to take that concept and apply it to individual songs—pack those emotions into three and a half minutes." In an utterly unhippie-like move, the group decided to document its growth in the form of *statEPolice*, a collection of spare tracks tied together by its upcoming album's ripest singles: "Too Late to Call" and "State Police."

"One of the goals of the EP was to say, 'Look man, we're a jamband, but we came out with a record based around songs,'" says McKee. "I think it's a solid record that anyone can get into, not just kids who are pissed that Phish broke up or the snobby indie-rock kids." In contrast to Hamilton's trim, military-style, the shaggy, bespectacled McKee is an old soul who, ironically, helms a futuristic arsenal of instruments. But he is equally as blunt as his bandmate: "Music doesn't have to be about picking a team and sticking with it."

After finishing the disc, Brothers Past returned to active roadwork, breezing through another 130 live dates at hipster bars, hippie festivals and rave-like electronic parties. The tour also scored Brothers Past its first international distribution deal: In late July, the group appeared at New York's semi-annual DJ/jam summit Zen. As luck would have it, the BIG Summer Classic had just wrapped up a few miles outside Manhattan, and String Cheese Incident and its extended Madison House family



stopped by Zen to blow off some steam and, of course, jam. Soon after, the group began discussions with SCI Fidelity.

Hamilton boils his new album down to the theme of goodbye: "It's not a sad goodbye, it's a happy goodbye—a closure. It's about letting go of old baggage, relationships... it's closure on the jamband stigma. I want to be known as the guy who changed the jamband scene by writing a great song." ★