

Kingsley Flood – *To The Fire*

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When **Naseem Khuri** has a verse to crack or a note in a new song that needs finessing, he doesn't pick up a guitar: he walks. He grabs his hat, double-checks to make sure he's got his headphones and heads out. He could be at home in Washington, D.C., passing row houses in Columbia Heights or taking a long detour over the city's weather-beaten sidewalks. He could be in Boston, his calloused fingers burrowing into his pockets away from the cold as he retraces steps in his former stomping grounds, or he could be turning an unfamiliar corner in Philadelphia, Chicago or Portland. He could be blasting the Clash or listening to the album of a band he'll be sharing the stage with for the first time. Wherever he is, whatever he's listening to, he's watching the scenes unfurl before him with an unblinking interest. Those steps have brought him and Kingsley Flood to the sound they can resoundingly call their own with their latest game-changing EP *To The Fire*.

Produced by **Paul Kolderie** (whose credits include seminal albums by the Pixies, Radiohead, Morphine, Portugal. The Man), *To The Fire* is a stylistically varied work that's very much the product of a band taking the reins of a musical identity shift. **Kingsley Flood** has spent the majority of their time together in transit, and they've got their split-between-two-cities arrangement to thank for that. Khuri resides in D.C., while **Nick Balkin** (bass), **Chris Barrett** (keys, trumpet), **George Hall** (lead guitar), **Travis Richter** (drums) and **Eva Walsh** (violin) are based in the Boston area. New England is where they started, played their first shows, and laid tape to the songs that would eventually become *Dust Windows*, their 2010 full-length debut. 2011's *Colder Still* EP and the triumphant *Battles* would follow in 2013, with both bodies of work embracing a haphazardly Americana take that revived tired country musings with 50-cent words, sociopolitical commentary and approachable rock riffs that sounded as good on a Strat as they did a fiddle. Their newest songs move on from this, namely "All in All," the pensive, unapologetic anthem boasting of "bootstrap pride" and the grand, sweeping and discordant gestures of "Thick of It."

"I've approached shows trying to channel Joe Strummer, and I think our music has started to be more reflective of that," says Khuri. "These songs finally feel like we're capturing what we have, what we've been looking for in the way we evolved over the past two years. This sounds like an accurate reflection of where we are."

Despite **Kingsley Flood**'s troubadour tropes, bluegrass echoes and the strident crow of a confident string line all working their way into the fabric of each and every tune, they never meant to be a nü country/Americana establishment. Khuri was into rock and punk bands growing up and considers Strummer to be his most formidable influence, and the members of **Kingsley Flood** have played in everything from pop-punk outfits to sprawling instrumental ensembles. (Barrett, the group's resident multi-instrumentalist, is a one-man band in and of himself, hopping between keys and trumpets and any given percussion device that can be shaken with a single hand.)

This independent verve hasn't stopped them from collecting compliments and accolades at a number of festivals and awards shows. With distinctions for their contributions to the New England and Boston music scenes, critically lauded performances at the Newport Folk Festival, South By Southwest, KahBang! Music Festival and a regular sold-out show schedule that brought them up and down the Eastern Seaboard in the rear view, **Kingsley Flood** was poised to hit the ground running in the months following *Battles*' release – and that's when they drew inward.

The band took over Barrett's parents' home on the snowy Massachusetts/New Hampshire border and dove into hours-long songwriting binges. As usual, Khuri brought the bones of a song or lyrics to the group, which fleshed them out with lush arrangements executed with surgical precision. A genre shift may have occurred since *Battles* and the twangier output before it, but Khuri's penchant for evocative language remains the cornerstone of **Kingsley Flood**'s musical foundation.

"My number one rule is show don't tell," says Khuri. "I channel some of the writers I really respect, like Raymond Carver. His short stories paint clear pictures with details, and that's what I'm always trying to do. With 'Cavalry,' I wanted to paint a vivid scene of a family sitting at a dinner table, stuck in their routine. My favorite songs, the ones that embed themselves in my brain, use small details – 'the flies in the kitchen,' 'the screen door slams' – to bring characters and their struggles to life. That's how I try to tell stories."

And that's where the walking comes in. Khuri's M.O. still requires a walk around the city to not only massage the kinks in his own process but encounter new inspiration. "I wonder what happens when we grow up and realize maybe we're not going to change the world the way we thought we would when we were 22, says Khuri. "I have an overriding fear of complacency." The tension between haves and have-nots is a common thread in Kingsley folklore, one Khuri sees and reflects on during his walks. "That's a big thing for me: How are you going to make your stamp on this world? What are you going to do with your time? I used to be rallying for peace in Israel/Palestine [Khuri grew up in a Palestinian-American household] and thinking that I'd have an impact there, and now it's a question of, what is your reach and what can you do? The context in which these songs happened involves looking at different sides of a city, and how the lines of wealth are defined there. I see it on these walks and how segregated these cities are. It's this idea of realizing how the sort of impact you can have on the world is changing, and also this idea that I've gotten a better glimpse of how things aren't changing."

All of this – Khuri's ebullient songwriting, the band's exceptional musicianship and newfound confidence, their collective commitment to their tastes away from trends – has made for a perfect storm that fuels the fire of their most ambitious endeavor yet. They wanted to write themselves into a stupor of sounds and striking verses that ditched the pretense and the preconceived notions of what a band like **Kingsley Flood** should sound like in a post-Mumford age. They got to the meat of the songs they've been hoping to write all along, and it only took a few steps down foreign and familiar sidewalks to do it.

– Hilary Hughes

Kingsley Flood is:

- Naseem Khuri: vocals, rhythm guitar
- Eva Walsh: violin, vocals
- Chris Barrett: trumpet, keys, percussion, vocals
- George Hall: lead guitar, vocals
- Nick Balkin: bass, vocals
- Travis Richter: drums, percussion, vocals