

Tilly & the Wall

by Sarah A. McCarty

Storybook Beginnings to Fairy-Tale Endings



photo by Jamie Warren

Once upon a time a girl met a boy at a concert. They eventually got married, but this is not about that. This is not a love story. This is a story about music ... and tap dancing. The girl, the boy and their three best friends soon formed a new band of their own. Inspired by a children's storybook, the five friends fashioned a fitting name for the band: Tilly and the Wall. Since the creation of Tilly and the Wall, the musical family has carved out a niche for itself in the world of independent pop music.

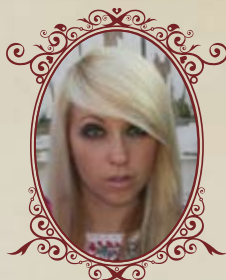
Chapter One: Faces & Places



Jamie Pressnall
tap dancing/percussion



Kianna Alarid
vocals



Neely Jenkins
vocals



Nick White
keyboards



Derek Pressnall
guitar/vocals



ust as so many bands before it, Tilly and the Wall's foundation was built from disbanded groups and connections in the local music scene. However, unlike many bands before it, Tilly and the Wall played with its imagination and its strengths to create a one of a kind sound and product.

First on the scene were Kianna Alarid, Neely Jenkins and Jamie Williams. The three girls hail from Omaha, Nebraska, where they were all honing their musical talents. Jamie and Neely had previously worked together as part of Bright Eyes-talent Conor Oberst's 1996 Omaha band Park Ave. After Park Ave.'s two-year run, Jamie met Kianna as a member of the short-lived group, Magic Kiss. Rounding out the full house are Nick White and Derek Pressnall aka, the boy who eventually married Jamie Williams (now Pressnall). Nick and Derek played together in their hometown of Dunwoody, Georgia, outside of Atlanta. The boys left their Georgia home to taste the Omaha music scene after that fateful Bright Eyes concert where they met Jamie.

Jamie sacrificed sleeping and relaxing time en route to the second stop of their tour for the new album to tell Tilly's story.

"Nick and Derek were in a band in Atlanta. We met when I was selling merchandise on a Bright Eyes tour. They came to Omaha to see if they liked it. We were just hanging out and writing songs."

The five friends formed fast bonds exploring their musical ropes and individual gifts. The band naturally came together with Kianna and Neely offering vocals, Nick on keyboards and Derek playing guitar and adding another set of vocals. But the key to their success was the bold decision to set Tilly's songs to tap dancing percussion as performed each night by Jamie. Part of the Tilly lure is experiencing a live show complete with the amplified rat-a-tat-tat of Jamie's tap shoes. Just how she manages to keep going performance after performance with Tilly's high-energy shows is an impressive feat. As the human drum set, Jamie explained, "The first week or two I get tired, then your body adjust. Your body expects to do it." As Jamie dances out the beats, the rest of

the band join in to perform a lively act for eager audiences. Each show offers a unique set that is as enjoyable to the fans as it is to the performers, who play off the energy of the crowd. "You can't really practice for shows. You practice with the band, but it's a totally different thing when you perform," Jamie said.

With three successful albums now out, Tilly has proved to any naysayers that the unusual percussion instrument of Jamie's feet was much more than a gimmick. The tap dancing is an integral part of Tilly and the Wall's artistry, as any self-proclaimed "tilly kid" will verify.

Once they found their sound, the group needed a name.

"At the time we were just kinda going through a bunch of different names. Not everyone liked one name, and I just always liked the way the title of this children's book sounded. I suggested it and they liked it too," Jamie explained.

The title, taken from a children's storybook *Tillie and the Wall* written by Leo Lionni, embodies the spirit of the band and has come to mean so much more.

"Now that we've been a band for a while, it's kind of fitting for us. The story is about overcoming obstacles and being yourself. Those are things that are really important for us," Jamie reflected.

Now that the band had a face with its inspired name, they set out to record their first record, but it wasn't a fairy tale task.

Jamie said Tilly sent out demos everywhere and no one was interested. Finally, with the help of friend Conor Oberst and his new Team Love label, they debuted their first album.

Jamie praised, "Conor is the reason we even have records out. When no one was interested, he was just like, 'I'm gonna put it out myself.' He also took us out on our first tour. He's the most supportive person of our band."

The aptly named debut album *Wild Like Children* hit the shelves in 2004 and captured audiences everywhere as Tilly received critical acclaim and began writing their dreams, joining national tours with Bright Eyes, Rilo Kiley and Of Montreal.

Chapter Two: Melodies & Harmonies



With Tilly's first album, *Wild Like Children*, it became clear that the sun shines out of their tap-dancing feet, harmonizing vocals, playful melodies and lively spirits. Their debut effort plays out almost like a dreamlike sequence. The scene opens with the harmonious sounds of "Fell Down the Stairs," a surreal memory of young love. *Wild Like Children's* nostalgic sagas close

with a song affirming "we will sing pretty songs about love/ And we will fight if that's what it takes/ And we won't back down." All the songs in between offer youth-centric emotional tunes sung with passion.

Jamie, Kianna, Neely, Derek and Nick willingly accept their place in the indie pop music world as an ode to youth. They embrace that inner child phenomenon and wrap each lyric in a bundle of sugarcoated sounds. Using that sugarcoating, Tilly plays coy to its fans with their ever-so buoyant beats that mask darker images with a translucent canopy of chorus. Tilly's narrative lyrics add another element to its sound. The quintet-writing team tends to compose melancholy stories of teenage angst and lost moments juxtaposed with their pop harmonies to create their quirky sound.

Jamie said the band doesn't necessarily set out to have that interplay between words and music. "Sometimes after we finish a song, we look and we're like, 'Oh, well this song is kind of dark, but it's like a pop song.' We just kind of write what were feeling and it just happens. And we all love pop music. It is just what comes out naturally."

It may be hard to believe that anything comes out naturally when five people write for one band. "It changes every time. Sometimes we write collectively the whole song together. Sometimes one of us will bring in a skeleton and say I want you to add a part here and fill it out there," Jamie explained. No matter how they choose to compose their rhymes and rhythms, the Tillies somehow manage to work together to generate charming albums.

The second album *Bottoms of Barrels* maintains the celebration of pop tunes with its cheerful cadence on tracks like "Bad Education" and "Urgency." The song titles on Tilly's second release even emit jovial bursts from "Sing Songs Along" to "Coughing Colors." However, the true gem of the 2006 album is the poignant, yet slightly sinister "Lost Girls." The atmospheric vocals on the track render a canvas for Tilly to tell a story drawn from the work of reclusive American artist Henry Darger.

All five songwriters reunited to write Tilly's third album, which was recently released on the Team Love label in mid June. Tilly develops its writing skills on its nameless album, now recognized by an O-shaped symbol on the cover. "We just wanted to basically not have a title, but have a symbol. That way people could kind of call it whatever they wanted too. I call it O. Derek calls it Booyah." Tilly's album "Booyah" is

known for its artwork. The Tillies asked artist to contribute any style of work for the album to be framed by the O shape. Jamie said not having a title was also a way to put more focus on the art – the music and the visual art.

Not only did the Tillies experiment with the title, but they also experimented sonically, flirting with more instruments here and there. Jamie said working with permanent Bright Eyes member Mike Mogis in his "brand new state of the art recording studio" provided the band with a lot of resources. Although Mogis had worked with the group before, Jamie said this was the first time "he did everything." Under Mogis's guidance and skill, the Tillies created an album that features a variety of sounds from the typical keyboards, guitars and vocal harmonies to trombones, trumpets and an accordion. Enhancing the band's signature taps, Tilly utilized stomps along with bells, chimes and a glockenspiel.

In addition to the infusion of new instruments, Jamie said the new album is "a little more punk and tough sounding."

After its 30-second solo-tap intro, Tilly's "Too Excited" off the new album showcases that edginess they tried to capture as does the second track, a smack-talk anthem called "Pot Kettle Black." The song almost reeks of an ipod commercial that might feature flashes of vibrant colors synced perfectly with each stomp and a shadowed tap dancer promoting the mp3 player.

Just as the first two albums before it, Tilly still has the lyrical and musical interplay as they balance words and sounds. For instance, on the mysterious track "Chandelier Lake" the lyrics step out of the sunlight emitted from the bouquet of tones and into the ominous shadows. The song opens with lines like, "The banks are stained with blood and rain/ where the water meets the land./ A secret there they'll never share./ A code of silence." Against the backdrop of spirited sounds, the words continue down the dim path, "There exposed was clothes and bones./ And a ring on a lifeless hand./ The trees and wind they hold their breath/ All feigning ignorance."

Jamie said this album has benefited because they are more developed songwriters, which may be one reason why the group was finally able to include "Tall Tall Grass" on an album. The track opens O and highlights the softer side of Tilly. "We started writing it for *Wild Like Children*, then we reworked it for the second album, and still didn't use it. We were able to include it on this one," Jamie said. "It's just kind of interesting that it's been with us since the beginning."

As writers, Jamie says experience plays a key role in their content. "I think we all are just kind of inspired by relationships, including our relationship to ourselves. We are also inspired by the people around us and other artists and visual artists. We just try to take everything in I guess."

Chapter Three: Living & Loving



It's clear that the spirited Tillies live life to the fullest. From water balloon fights and bonfires complete with s'mores, the Tillies stay young at heart and try to make the most of their experiences. "We are definitely up for everything. If someone has a crazy idea, we are always like, 'yeah let's do it.'" Jamie said they always schedule days off in between their energetic perform-

mances to sight see and enjoy themselves on tour, especially when they play for crowds in destinations like Australia, Japan and New Zealand. Once back home, sometimes they will return to their pre-Tilly activities. Before joining the band, both Jamie and Neely were teachers. Neely taught fourth grade, and Jamie was teaching pre-kindergarten as part of a Head Start program. Members of the band also found new hobbies during their time off.

"I've been reupholstering furniture for fun, and decorating the house," Jamie said. She also dished on Derek, who married Jamie in August of 2006, shortly after the release of *Bottoms of Barrels*. "Derek is always

writing music and doing artwork in our basement," Jamie confessed. In addition to his solo music project, *Flowers Forever*, apparently Derek also has found his green thumb, and is pretty proud of it. "Derek gardens – he just told me to tell you that," Jamie relays over the phone. "We have an awesome garden. It just started blooming before we left. I hope it's still there when we get back."

Whether their blooms will be there when they get back is yet to be seen, but one thing that is always there for them is their Tilly family.

As the first artists on Oberst's label, Kianna, Neely, Derek, Jamie and Nick personify Team Love with their tight bond. Despite inevitable family tiffs, they remain the best of friends. Jamie explains, "We put things into perspective. Our friendships are more important than the band."

As for the future of the band, the Tillies will continue to live out their dream, just as all children wish to do.

"We're having fun right now and we'll see how the record does and the tour, and just keep going as long as we can."

The End.



photo by Jamie Warren