

Let's Stay Together

In 2009 Kam Franklin drunkenly tumbled off a bicycle near Rice University and shattered her ankle. After she got out of surgery, her doctor prescribed three months bed rest. If that went well, she was told, she could look forward to at least as many months hobbling around in an orthopedic boot. At the time, Franklin was 22 years old, making a name for herself as one of Houston's most versatile backup singers—she sang swamp-pop with Nick Gaitan & the Umbrella Man, explored Latin punk with Los Skarnales, and even did a stint as a dubstep MC. When she got hurt, she bowed out of everything. ¶ “I stopped doing music completely. I went into this weird depression,” says Franklin. She began focusing on her day job at a Houston investment bank, where she rose from receptionist to full-fledged gas-and-power trade analyst. “I got it in my head that because I couldn't move onstage the way I used to, it was over for me. I convinced myself nobody wanted to see me. I just cut everybody off. I got bitter.” ¶ Two years after the accident, Pat Kelly, Los Skarnales' keyboard player, called to say that he and another bandmate, bassist Adam Castaneda, were putting together an all-star team of Houston's best ska, reggae, and dub musicians. Franklin's ankle had healed by then, but she liked her day job, and she figured her career in music was behind her. Still, reluctantly, she agreed to go to a rehearsal. “Initially it was going to be a wedding band,” she says. “A bunch of ska kids we knew were getting married. I figured it would be a weekend thing for easy money with friends and some

HOW THE SUFFERS—ALL TEN OF THEM—PROVED THE NAYSAYERS WRONG TO BECOME THE HOTTEST R&B BAND IN TEXAS.

BY ANDY LANGER

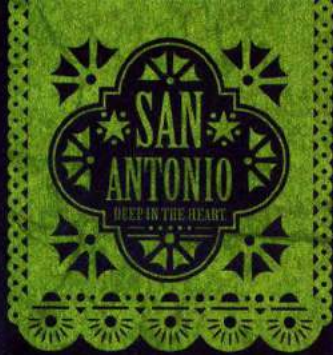
musicians I'd always wanted to play with.”

The ten-piece group came up with a name, the Suffers, inspired by the classic Jamaican film *Rockers* (the movie's main character refers to himself at one point as “a sufferer”), and worked up a set list that included ska and reggae covers heavy on classic acts like the Specials and Toots and the Maytals and reggaefied takes on songs by the likes of Bobby Brown, David Bowie, and Selena. “At the first rehearsal, I had an aha moment,” Franklin says. “I didn't know it was going to be a real band, but I knew, instantly, that this was the thing that was missing in my life. And I knew that running away from it was dumb. And all my fault.”

Thanks largely to her energy, one gig turned into many gigs; suddenly, Franklin, who had made her name as a backup singer, was front and center in a very busy band. And before long, the covers gave way to original material, particularly after early lineup changes brought drummer Nick Zamora and his guitarist brother Alex into the fold, both of whom composed tunes that Franklin could set lyrics to. Then, mostly out of fear they'd forever be labeled a goofy ska band, Franklin pushed for a hard left turn toward the R&B-influenced material the Zamoras were writing.

“We weren't neo-soul or retro-soul—it was this weird thing in the middle,” she says. “We started describing ourselves as Gulf Coast soul.” Franklin notes the name reflects Houston's ethnic diversity—which the

The Suffers, from left: Pat Kelly, Michael Razo, Alex Zamora, Jon Durbin, Kam Franklin, Jose “Chapy” Luna, Nick Zamora, Adam Castaneda, Cory Wilson, and Kevin Bernier in Houston on February 3, 2016.



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Suffers' makeup mirrors—and the gumbo of musical influences they brought to the group, from Latin punk to New Orleans funk. They weren't the first to latch on to the genre label; another Texan with a huge, smoky voice, the legendary Barbara Lynn, long ago dubbed herself the "Empress of Gulf Coast Soul."

The move paid off. Last year, the band played 155 shows, including gigs at the Newport Folk Festival and the Austin City Limits Music Festival, and appeared on *The Late Show With David Letterman*. This year, *Billboard* named the group's just-out full-length debut, *The Suffers*, one of the ten most anticipated rock/alternative albums of 2016, and NPR's prestigious First Listen showcase hosted the album's prerelease premiere. "It took me a while to come around to the fact that no matter what you do to my voice, no matter what I'm singing, I'm a soul singer," Franklin says. "The years I spent jumping between genres, trying to pretend I wasn't a soul singer, probably held me back more than anything. The moment I stopped trying to be something else, things started happening for me and for all of us."

Not much happened quickly or easily, though. Time and time again, the Suffers heard from bookers that there was no way a ten-piece band could afford to tour—shave it down to five or six people, they were told, and something might happen. Worse, there was body shaming. "They'd say, 'You're not a tiny little thing,'" recalls Franklin. "So now, for us, every day is a new victory for the band that keeps getting told no. No doesn't mean shit to me now. It just means I'm going to have to ask somebody else. Every time somebody told us we couldn't do something, it seems to happen anyway."

The band's in-the-face-of-impossible-odds success is yet another indication that we're in the midst of a perpetual R&B moment. A decade or so after Sharon Jones & the Dap Kings' and Amy Winehouse's initial success, seemingly every city has at least one band that merges soul, funk, and traditional R&B. Austin has Tameca Jones, the Nightowls, and LaTasha Lee & the Black Ties. L.A. gave us Fitz and the Tantrums. Last year, Denver's Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats put out "S.O.B.," an unstoppable radio hit. And maybe you've heard of Fort Worth's Leon Bridges?

But though there's now an audience primed for soul music and its variants, the genre's success can also be a burden on newcomers; so many people are doing it that it's tough to stand out. Luckily for the Suffers, most R&B revivalists don't feature a focal point as commanding or versatile as Franklin. Watch the Suffers' appearance last year on NPR's Tiny Desk concert series and you'll notice that she's constantly circling the mike, not sing-

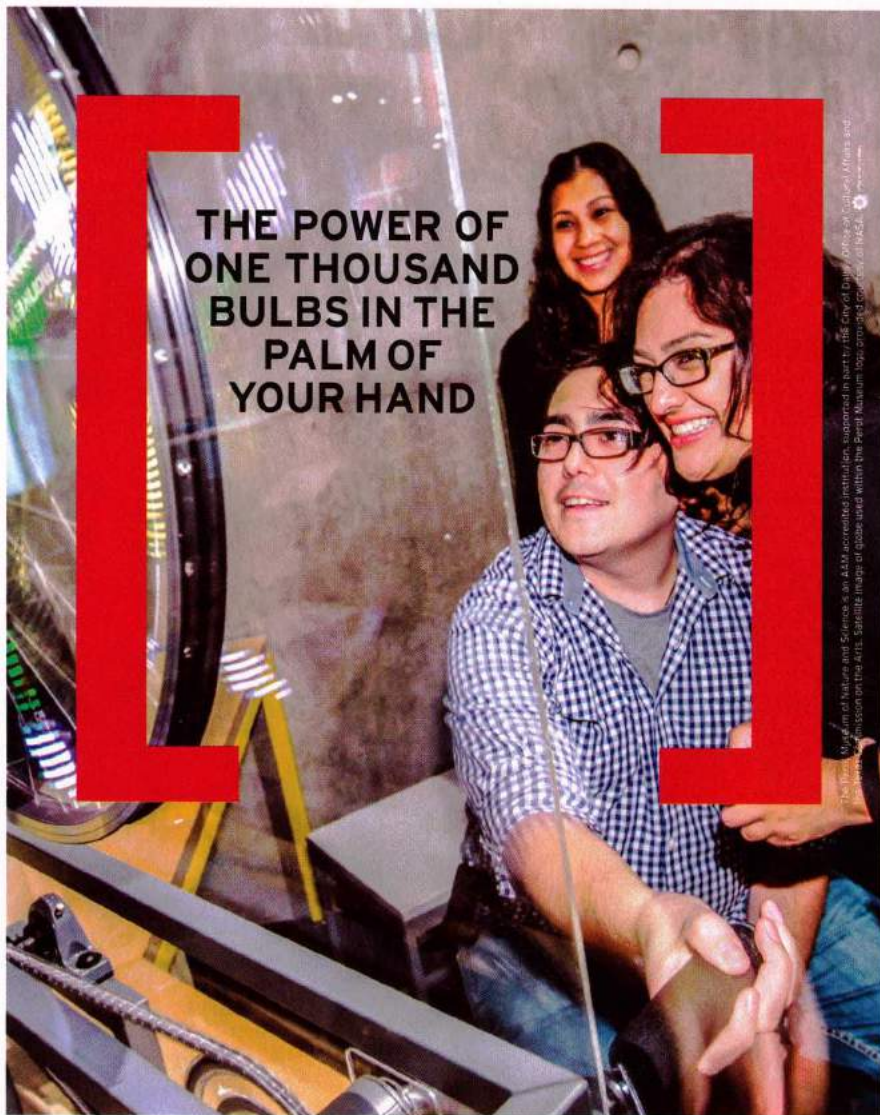
ing directly into it, for fear of blowing it out. Yet even when she's cooing, as soul singers sometimes do to bring it down a notch, she's no less authoritative. Pair that powerful voice with a regionally distinctive strand of R&B that's flavored with pinches of ska and punk swagger and infused with heavy doses of Latin music and you've got a band that fits perfectly between the gaps of the modern soul revival.

Even so, nothing beats a big break. The Suffers' happened in late 2014, when they were one of more than 1,300 bands playing New York's CMJ Music Marathon. On the third night of the festival, Roman Palylyk, a music booker for David Letterman, randomly found himself at the Texas Takeover showcase and caught the tail end of a set by a band he'd never heard of. He vowed to see the Suffers again at another showcase the next night and was knocked out by what he saw. Five months later the Suffers made their television debut in front of more than two million viewers.

How hard was it to convince his bosses to give a slot to an unsigned band with just a few singles to its name? "Very hard," Palylyk says. "But we knew Kam could deliver. Her presence onstage, her cool, is the stuff you can't fake. And that's the stuff that works on TV."

The Suffers made their *Late Show* debut last March, playing a song, "Gwan," that was unfamiliar to virtually every viewer outside a handful of Houston zip codes. Most bands hit Letterman's stage with a big radio hit, but for the Suffers, presence and dynamics would have to trump familiarity. At the start of their performance, the camera lingered on the three-piece horn section before fully committing to tracking Franklin, who, tipping her hat to her home state, was wearing cowboy boots and a wildflower-print dress. On the verses she purred each suggestive line with an accompanying shimmy that sent her back and forth across enough of the stage that the move almost amounted to an optical illusion—Letterman's famously small set felt implausibly expansive, an especially impressive feat when you consider that Franklin was sharing it with nine other musicians. On the choruses she was outright ferocious but also playfully seductive. And then, just after the halfway point, Franklin, who had the audience in the palm of her hand, ceded the spotlight to percussionist Jose "Chapy" Luna, who ran away with a near-25-second conga solo (yet another reminder that this band is from Texas and that more than half of its members are Latino). Who sets aside 25 seconds, a television eternity, for a percussion breakdown? Apparently, the Suffers.

When the song came to a crashing end, a clearly wowed Letterman jogged over to embrace Franklin and deliver his verdict: "Oh,



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come on!" he said to the camera. "I'm tellin' you! If you can't do this, get out of the business! You know what I mean?" Then, arm slung around Franklin's shoulder, he delivered a big, audible kiss to the top of her head.

It was the kind of break any unsigned band hopes for, and the Suffers were ready for it. They knew the only way they could capitalize on that moment was to tour behind it, so a few months before the show, they took a leap: every member of the band quit his day job. By all accounts, the meeting to decide whether to go all-in wasn't easy.

"It was a tough talk," says Castaneda, who was working as a construction manager for ExxonMobil's giant new campus in The Woodlands. "We're adults, not kids. There's wives, children, and financial stability on the line. And it was all ten or nothing. If nine said yes and one didn't, we weren't going to do it."

Some members were more apprehensive than others—there was some arguing—but ultimately they all agreed and soon after embarked on their marathon 2015 tour. Between gigs, they decided to finally release their album, most of which they'd recorded a year earlier in Austin. While the buzz of playing *Letterman* as an unsigned band led to some labels sniffing around, the offers weren't great, so the band turned to self-funding the album's release via Kickstarter. Franklin sees the band's full ownership of the record as the continuation of its all-for-one, one-for-all ethos. "That's what the Superman represents," she says. "Every night."

The Superman? It's what the Suffers call their preshow ritual. Every gig starts the same way: Standing in place, instruments on and ready, each member of the band counts off. Kelly is first: "One!" Nick Zamora always goes second. A few moments later, when Luna yells, "Ten!" the bandmates raise their arms over their heads, wave their hands, and let out a long shout. Sometimes, when they're sardined on a small stage, it's easy to hear one another count. Other times, like when they recently headlined a New Year's Eve gig at Houston's House of Blues, the curtain opens to a wall of cheers so thick they can't hear themselves count at all. If there's just a handful of those kinds of nights in the months ahead, Franklin says, she'll be happy.

"Whatever we fought about before, whatever stress there is from being packed into a tiny van, once we start yelling and the hands are in the air, everything falls away," she says. "When we Superman, it's a reminder you're not alone here—there's nine other people that share the same dream, and sometimes the same struggle. When we count it off, I feel like we're going to win. I know we will." 🗝

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