

O'Neal hits indie-rock scene with Summa

Written by Darci Tomky

“Everything I’m doing right now is focused on the music,” said 24-year-old Jake O’Neal. “I’ve always wanted to do something that’s me—uniquely me.” This 2007 Holyoke High School grad is putting everything he has into his career as a musician and singer-songwriter, namely with his band Summa.

That’s pronounced soom-uh ... as in summa cum laude ... as in O’Neal graduated summa cum laude from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Even though he has a degree in electrical engineering, music is his focus. “I realized I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life as an engineer,” he said.

According to the band, “Summa, by definition, is the cohesion of distinct bases of knowledge into a comprehensive whole.” O’Neal graduated in May of 2012, and in the fall teamed up with multi-instrumentalist, drummer and producer Max Grossman to form an indie-rock duo. They said the moniker perfectly embodied their fusion of style and talent. Prodigal 16-year-old Miles Bragg was added in May 2013 as a live bassist to round out their power trio.

O’Neal, who is the lead singer, guitarist and songwriter for Summa, described their music as a mix of melodic rock songs and heavier rock songs with a darker edge. They can be compared to bands like Kings of Leon, Muse and Radiohead, which have all inspired their style of music.



Summa performs at an intimate “Moorhead on Saturdays” concert held in Jake O’Neal’s home in Boulder. Pictured from left are bassist Miles Bragg, guitarist and vocalist O’Neal and drummer and producer Max Grossman.

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According to their website, summamusic.com, Summa is known for its intimate lyrics, catchy hooks, gripping stage presence and O'Neal's vocal versatility—oscillating between raw intensity and smooth falsetto.

O'Neal said their live performances are like a hard rock show experience, with his band playing consistently at just about every type of venue in the Denver and Boulder areas.

The famous Fox Theatre in Boulder was their biggest show and a dream come true for O'Neal. "Every famous band I love has played there," he said, not hiding his excitement at the announcement that Summa will be headlining at the Fox this fall, probably in November.

Summa released their debut single "Microlove" earlier this year in February, and their five-song EP of the same name is now on sale at iTunes.

It includes four original songs written by O'Neal—"Microlove," "Forces," "Sex Gun" and "Love at 16"—with an additional song, "There There," a Radiohead cover.

Two of the songs also feature Michael Kang, an electric mandolin player from The String Cheese Incident, a well-known Boulder band.

The EP, recorded at Mighty Fine Productions in Denver, can be heard at soundcloud.com/summamusic/sets/microlove-ep/s-pc4T5

What sets Summa apart from other groups is the songwriting. "I just explore and try to find something that sounds good to me," said O'Neal, who gets songwriting inspiration from every aspect of life.

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The guitar is where he usually goes first, pounding out an instrumental melody which is then paired with words later. That's how it works most of the time, anyway.



Summa's five-song EP "Microlove" is set for release this fall.

With roots in Holyoke, O'Neal wrote the song "Microlove" during a trip to his hometown to help his dad with the annual corn harvest. It's a song about himself, but it was inspired by his parents, Rupert and Claire O'Neal.

"Each day while driving the grain cart, I wondered if my future would be in music, engineering or back home on the farm," said O'Neal on his website. "I realized my dad was in a similar position at my age, at which point he chose farming, thereby forcing my mom to convert to a small town lifestyle."

He's asking himself if that's something his partner will want and if she would go with him, simply to be with him.

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The song starts out with, “Microlove ... one millionth of the love we share could get us through anything including this. I know it’s terrifying. I know it’s not your path. But I have to follow my own.”

He goes on to say, “At this crossroads I will say, though it breaks my heart I will say, you don’t need to follow me back home, but I’d love if you did.”

With Summa’s EP coming out soon, O’Neal plans to send it to producers around the country, hoping to get signed and be put on that coveted higher career track with his music. But he still wonders where his music is headed, or if he’ll be back in the grain cart for the next harvest. Or life could take him in a completely different direction.

Summa is going to keep recording, keep playing at shows that might—someday—turn into a national tour.

When he’s not at a gig, O’Neal is hosting his bi-weekly showcase event called “Moorhead on Saturdays.” It’s at his house on Moorhead Avenue on Saturdays. Simple enough.

He invites local musicians and bands to perform an intimate concert complete with theater seating, HD projector, pro sound and great acoustics.

In addition to Summa, O’Neal plays bass in the five-piece outfit Intuit, led by passionate singer and cellist Chloe Watkins. O’Neal said Intuit’s fun, easy listening style differs from Summa’s serious, intimate vibe.

According to their website at intuitband.com, “Intuit is a funk, reggae, soul party in your eardrum, encompassing multiple styles and always keeping the groove.” After listening to their “Heart Compass” EP, it’s not hard to quickly get “Intuit.”

Music has always been a part of O’Neal’s life. “Dad got me into music at a young age,” he said.

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“I’ve always loved music.”

High school is where he began songwriting, and locals might remember him playing drums, bass or guitar in just about every music ensemble available, from pep band and jazz band to concert band and choir. He could also be seen on stage in HHS drama productions and musicals.

The recent CU grad beat out 87 other vocalists to place second in “CU Idol,” and the idea of pursuing music full-time became a reality.

Keep up with O’Neal’s latest music ventures at jakeonealmusic.com or start following Summa at facebook.com/summa or twitter.com/summa_music

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