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Q&A: The Black Lips' Jared Swilley on the Band's Middle Eastern Tour Doc, Their Wild Reputation, and How Metallica Stole Their Antarctica Idea

By [Zach Dionne](#) on December 6, 2013 5:15 PM ET



Four years ago, the Black Lips got run out of India after a messy performance. Guys made out onstage, guys strummed guitars with their genitals — pretty [standard stuff](#) for the Atlanta foursome that formed as rude high schoolers back in 1999. Over the course of six albums, the self-described "flower punks" have maintained their straightforward, fun-centric, booze-friendly approach, most recently with 2011's Mark Ronson-produced *Arabia Mountain*. The band's moments beyond the indie box have been rare (a [performance](#) of "O Katrina" on Conan, a [spot](#) on the *(500) Days of Summer* soundtrack with "Bad Kids"), but they stay as busy as anyone, playing between 100 and 200 shows every year. Last autumn, the Pitchfork favorites brought their act to the Middle East, playing a market historically underserved by Western groups. The Lips did Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Cypress, and the United Arab Emirates. *Kids Like You and Me* is the result, a 75-minute rock documentary and concert film following the Black Lips and their tour mates, Lebanon's Lazy Lung. The documentary is [available this week](#); here, Black Lips bassist and vocalist Jared Swilley talks about the group's sticky reputation, music's value in a climate of political upheaval, and which big idea Metallica swiped from the Lips.

How'd you end up going to the Middle East?

We were just going to tour somewhere we had an opportunity to tour in. The last concert by a Westerner in Egypt was Shakira playing the Pyramids a few years ago, and before that it was the Grateful Dead in 1978. But I don't see why that's not a viable stop for people going on tour, because so much of the population is under 30. And no one really knew us there — maybe some expats and maybe some hipster kids. But there's tons of kids in Cairo who wanna go see a show, and it's not that hard to get there. No different than any other country where you don't have a visa-labor program. You just buy a visa at the airport. But we weren't trying to change anything, we had no political agenda, no "love the world" kinda thing. I guess it may have come off like that, but we were just doing what we would do normally anywhere else.

"Love the world" — you mean a big, hollow pop-star PR stunt?

Like corny, free-the-world, free-Tibet kind of things. I don't like when celebrity culture tries to interject into world politics. I guess Bono's probably a nice guy, but I would never wanna be someone like that.

I like how you guys were working to establish a circuit for Western bands to tour through. It'll be interesting to see if other groups follow your lead.

It's ready to go, but there's just no juice. It'd be really difficult to be an indie band there because you have national highways but you have to fly everywhere else; there's not a continental highway system. The notion of touring like we do in Western Europe or in North America, that concept doesn't exist because of the infrastructure. If you're a band making no money in the U.S., yeah, you can live outta garbage cans and homeless shelters and get a van and drive around, but over there you've gotta fly everywhere. Even us — we're more established than a lot of bands, and we had to have Converse as a sponsor 'cause we had to fly between shows.

Was Converse enough of a buffer that you didn't have to be too concerned about whether the tour was a financial success?

Well, no, we lost a lot of money on the tour. We were just nickel-and-dimin' it.

What was your takeaway from the tour?

It was one of the greatest few weeks in my life. Aside from that, maybe a slight awareness of the region? I think Beirut and Cairo are definitely places a band should play. I don't wanna sound pompous, but just like blue jeans and rock and roll took down the Iron Curtain, I think the same could be done for the Middle East. Most of the kids we met out there — our demographic and people who are our peers — they don't care about religion and politics; it's stupid and it's boring and it's ... people do dumb shit.

Talking about going to the West Bank a few years ago, you [told Pitchfork](#) "they hate America for the same reasons I hate America."

Yeah, I still feel the same way. I love America for the reasons that most people over there who are open-minded love America, too.

Did you feel like you were held to higher standards on this tour, like you were representing America?

I acted like myself the entire time, and I would act the exact same way if I was in north Georgia or in an elementary school here. But a lot of the shows over there, there were whole families there, kids, grandparents, and people our age. We had one crazy show in Cairo where we were doing our normal thing, and that's fine, but you always draw the line if there's kids there, or old people. As far as being a representative, I'm not gonna do a keg stand in a bar there or like, grab girls' asses — not that I do that anywhere. We were kinda being respectful, and we were definitely out of our element. Two days before we were going, they set the American Embassy on fire in Cairo and our moms were calling our label and our manager trying to get them to cancel the trip, so we were a little cautious at first. But really it wasn't that different from anywhere else we go. It just wasn't that crazy.

There's an early scene that cuts between you guys playing this one happy-go-lucky gig and some very intense Arab Spring footage. It made me wonder: What does it take for artists to take themselves seriously in a volatile, revolutionary environment, to hope their art will connect despite the massiveness of what's going on?

There's so much that's important about art in a situation like that. First off, you have such a huge young population, and those are the people that wanna create. Art stems from adversity and crazy shit going on; that's when you get the best stuff. That's why Brooklyn, people migrate there, but that isn't really a place where

awesome, really off-the-cuff stuff gets created. And people need stuff to do — there has to be a distraction from everyday life. You don't live that long, and what's the point of fighting for stuff, because you're not gonna be around that long and not even gonna see it progress? I think art, day to day, really is nurtured well in situations like that. And it also takes people's minds off it, so you don't have all this wild shit going on all the time, you have better things to do. If you didn't have distractions you'd just think about how sad everything is, like, your grandpa's gonna die and then you're gonna be a grandpa and you're gonna die. Distractions are awesome.

How'd you feel rubbing elbows with people who have had markedly more dangerous existences than I assume anyone in the Black Lips has experienced? There's a quote where one of your tour mates in Lazy Lung, a band from Beirut, says "Last year was a bloody year." That's almost no one's life in America.

No, and that's why I don't have a lot of patience for people who complain a lot here. There are certain circumstances — if you're a single mother with AIDS and you have eight children and no surviving members of your family, that's really sad. That's hard. But a significantly higher percentage of the population has it really good here.

Was any part of you looking forward to getting a redo of the India experience by going to the Middle East?

No. The India experience was a pretty negative thing. I mean, it was cool we got to go there and we set it up and there were parts of it I liked, but overall I was pretty disappointed by what happened over there. As far as doing shows and everything like that, the Middle East was way more open to it. I think India ... I dunno, I don't wanna say anything.

Well, how about this: How do you see your band? There's kind of a sordid legacy floating around you guys. What's *your* opinion of your reputation?

Uh, well ... I think we can be kinda misunderstood a lot of times, being brats or being destructive and stuff. But when we went to India there was all kinds of misunderstanding. We didn't really know what we were getting into and [long pause] things just got taken out of context, I guess. When we got there we were kinda being tame because no one really liked us and pretty much everyone thought we sucked because we were just a bunch of white guys with shitty guitars and they thought we were sloppy. They were into Green Day and Metallica and Lady Gaga and stuff like that, so there was a big disconnect. And then the people that were handling us were like, "Oh, you can do anything you want here, it's totally fine." And then two guys kiss and the police were called and our passports were gone and we lose all this money and stuff like that. We weren't trying to be offensive. I think that's kind of passé; you *can't* be offensive these days, especially in the Western world. Trying to go out of your way to do mean things, like take a dump somewhere, that's not cool, that's not even funny.

You don't try to provoke, then.

No, I would never wanna do that, either. I'm from the South, I come from a Christian family, I respect people. I think it's *funny* when people have dumb morals and mores that are easily offended — that's fine, because that's just pranking someone. But going out of the way to do something offensive is irresponsible. It's funny if you're 15, because 15-year-olds are hilarious. But after that, I don't think it's a very good look.

What's happening with the new album?

We're done. I have to come up with an album title; Cole's gonna come over in a minute and we're gonna flesh out an album title. Then this weekend [Mick Rock](#) is gonna come down and take pictures for the album cover. Mick Rock's the guy that shot all David Bowie's record covers and Joan Jett's and Iggy Pop's. He's called "the man who shot the '70s." He's gonna come down to Atlanta and stay with us and we're just gonna drive around and take pictures.

You recorded some of the new stuff with Patrick Carney from the Black Keys. Good chance to swap stories about getting mistaken for each other's bands?

It's mostly us getting mistaken for them. In the movie, when we're on that talk show in Lebanon — they didn't put it in the movie, but they kept calling us Black Keys and we never corrected them.

Is there a specific plan for the record or just lots more touring?

We're gonna tour for ... forever, 'cause now we've expanded our territory to six continents. Actually seven now because we're going to Antarctica. These dickheads in this band called Metallica are [trying to beat us there](#). We're trying to race Metallica to play in Antarctica right now, 'cause we're gonna be the first band to play on seven continents. They took that idea from us.

Wait, really?

Yeah.

Are you just talking shit?

No, no, I know for a fact. I found out through a friend of mine who is a musical associate of theirs. I don't know

how in the world we're gonna make it there before them. They might beat us, because they have [Versace blimps](#). But we have more heart. I heard they're playing acoustic, though, so maybe we can go in there and say we played the first electric show. It's really expensive to get there, so we're trying to find a sponsor to get us down there, and the government won't pay for it. Oh! Because the government puts out \$200,000 a year for art and culture and stuff for Antarctica, which is insane considering the deficit we're in, but they already used that fund, so we can't even tap into that.

Metallica got it?

Yeah, Metallica got it.

What'll it really mean if you're not the first ones there, though? You'll still be one of very few bands who've played on all the continents. And the gulf between you guys and Metallica is pretty huge. I think it's still a win.

Yeah, but what I want you to understand is that second place is the first loser. We just lost to Metallica, and those guys cry — on camera. Like, I've cried before, and that's fine, you're not a man unless you cry, but don't get that shit on film, and don't put that out in theaters. That's super ... I'm not gonna say any derogatory terms. But that's weak.

It's super not-the-dudes-who-should-beat-you-to-Antarctica-ish.

Yeah. And those guys aren't metal. They may have been metal *once*. I don't even *like* metal!

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