There's a funky new musical sensation quietly making its mark on the campus of Wesleyan University. Juniors Benjie Messinger-Barnes and Jared Keller, along with sophomore Graham Richman, form the act Barefoot Junction. Today I was lucky enough to sit down with Jared and Graham and chat about their musical past, their influences, and the secrets behind Barefoot Junction.

Max Ornstein: How did you first start playing music?

Graham Richman: I started taking piano lessons around, I think, seven? Seven, six, five, somewhere around there--

Jared Keller: You count it down?

GR: Well, yeah.

JK: [Laughs]

GR: And I did it because I really wanted to play guitar, but my mom wouldn't let me learn guitar until I took piano lessons, because she thought it was a more stable instrument. And it turned out to be a good choice.

MO: What about guitar?

GR: Well I started playing in seventh grade, and my first guitar was a Johnson, which is a company that only half exists. Nobody's ever heard of it, nobody knows where its based, there's no website, people have no idea where the factory is--

JK: What, did you order it out of the back of a fucking magazine?

GR: Basically [Laughs]. I went to this like vintage guitar shop, and my mom wanted to get me the cheapest thing she could find, since she didn't know if I'd stick with it. It made no sense to get something expensive, so she got me, well it was around fifty dollars. You would hit a chord and it would go right out of tune, so you'd have to tune up after every chord. It did wonders for my ear training.

JK: I played piano for a period of time in middle school, like most American youths do. But I didn't really follow it closely. Around Freshman year of high school I had a bunch of friends and we wanted to form a band, you know, for shits and giggles. And the only instrument we had open was the drums, which I didn't really know how to play. So I borrowed my friend's set, found out I was pretty good at it, or mildly good for a beginner. So I started taking lessons, got involved in school, and it turned from a flash-in-the-pan interest to a full-blow hobby, which I love.

MO: When did you get your first set?

JK: I got my first set, well I saved up money working Freshman year, and I bought a set from a female friend of mine, who got hers so she could be a “female drummer”, because they're so cool right? Like Meg White?

GR: [Laughs].
JK: She wasn't very talented—no, I'm serious, she was fucking awful. But she had this beautiful used set and she didn't want it anymore, so I bought it on the cheap. One of my cymbals actually cost more than the entire set did, if that's bourgeois enough for you.

MO: Who were your early influences?

GR: Um, I sort of went through the whole “liking things that everyone else liked” in middle school. The big thing in my middle school was the New Metal, like Limp Bizkit--

JK: I was a huge Linkin Park fan, actually.

GR: I was too.

JK: Some of their older stuff is surprisingly good, like “In the End”.

GR: Yeah, great songwriting. So I was into that, and when I really started focusing on music as a serious art form, I started really getting into the band Yes. I listened to every album, learned every part, learned the parts from the sheet music.

JK: I listened to a lot of music my friends were into, obviously. My friends actually had some pretty good music taste. These two friends, John and Jake, turned me on to a lot of music, like The Pixies, Frank Zappa, Mission to Burma, which is this mid-eighties band that plays really interesting sort of upside-down drum beats. But yeah, I was really into them and I started getting more sophisticated and personal with my tastes, I was listening to a lot of Motown, I used to listen to Ginger Baker tracks constantly. Soul and jazz are really good for training—syncopated funk beats too, those are really good for training.

MO: So, tell me about the first time you were in a band.

GR: The first band I was in was sort of half a band, half a thing me and my friends would do, it was middle school so there was only so much we could do. I think we played a high school or a middle school dance and that was about it. We only played covers. The first real band I was in was actually pretty late, since I wrote a lot of stuff on my own and recorded on my own. The first real band I was in was called Solar Tides, and, actually, if you ask someone from Westchester [New York] from my age group, they know. We won a bunch of really big Battle of the Bands, like we won County Center, which is where the Globetrotters play. We played there, we played Rye Playland, and we won that. We were pretty good, for how young and inexperienced we were. And people seemed to like it a lot.

MO: What did you play in that band?

GR: I played keyboards. Actually, I was brought in because the guitar player was away on vacation for a bunch of shows they wanted to play. So I was originally playing guitar, and when he came back, I guess they really liked me, so they were like, “Why don't you join and play something else?”

JK: I played in a band that changed names like once a month. Some of the names we went through were ¡Attention!, um--

GR: [laughs] That's a great band name!
JK: Yeah. Then there was China Syndrome, we were Bulletproof Monk, based off the comic, I'm assuming. I came up with ¡Attention! and China Syndrome. And then we were called Mudslide. And then we were finished, basically, because we couldn't deal with our bassist. We just disintegrated. What it was, was like two guitars, an acoustic guitar, a bass and drumset. The problem was all of our tastes were really different. Our lead singer and acoustic guitarist was influenced by like sing-songy, Guster style rock. I was influenced by my funk music. Our bassist was incredibly talented but eccentric, and he played like...well, he was obsessed with Victor Wooten, for example.

GR: [Laughs]

JK: Which is not so bad, but you can't like play in a band like that. And then one of our guitarists was like metal. And then there was one other, normal human being. But I played in a band for the last half of high school called Dead Finks, which was a really good experience. That was one of those times where everyone just meshed really well. We used to play a lot of outdoor shows. It was really good for the summer, good summer music. We actually used to not play shows in the winter, because we hated playing inside. So that was really enjoyable, but then we went to college and so that was dunzo.

MO: So tell me about Barefoot Junction. What is that, first of all?

GR: Barefoot Junction...

JK: What is Barefoot Junction? Barefoot Junction is a PhD program.

MO: In what?

JK: I don't know, what would you say it's in, Graham?

GR: I would say it's Retro Musicology.

JK: Nice. You earn five credits a semester

GR: [Laughs]

JK: There's a mandatory Barefoot tutorial, which involves heavy drug consumption and party jams. Consuming beer is good, while playing. Except if you're Benjie [Messinger-Barnes, the bassist for Barefoot Junction]--

GR: [Laughs] In which case it's a bad idea.

JK: In which case you pass out halfway through the song. [Laughs]. OK...Barefoot Junction started out really as nothing. I made a point of bringing my drumset to school, since I hadn't had it for the past two years, because I wanted to play music. And Benjie is actually a very good bassist, so we were jamming. We were playing music with Dan Charness for awhile. And then Graham started doing his thing, and we were seeing him more and more often, you know, down by our house. So we asked him to come play with us, and we play good music. So that's what it developed from. What it is now--

GR: I would say...well, as someone who came in after a lot of the material had been written, and so maybe has more of an outside perspective of what the music is, I sort of see it as very loose, funk-jam type of thing. The songs usually have one or two sections that we alternate between or have some
pattern between--

JK: With intermittent solos.

GR: But nothing's too set in stone. There's a lot of live signaling.

JK: Yeah, we've working really hard on our communication skills, which is key for playing. Everything is always up in the air, which is how we like it. I would say though, that the one thing that I really like about our music is the pickups, sometimes. Or the breaks that we do.

GR: Yeah, absolutely.

JK: Like that salsa break we do in the middle of “Mad Lab” is fucking dirty.

MO: Salsa break?

JK: It's like having a sound seizure, basically.

GR: What we tend to do, for the most part—we have a funk section, a solid center section of the piece that's funk. In some songs we have breakdowns into other styles, and in some songs there aren't. For instance, the salsa break. There's also this break in “The Chameleon” that we do.

JK: Yeah, we play “The Chameleon”. It's a good warm up. Everyone likes Herbie Hancock, and if you don't, well, you're probably a fucking communist.

GR: I think it's funk-riff bass music.

JK: There's belligerency involved.

GR: Lots of belligerency.

JK: I don't have a lot of training in music, like I can barely read music. And it's funny, I used to play in a jazz band in high school, and they were like, “Jared, for the love of God, just play something!” And I would do it.

GR: From someone who is doing a lot of technical study now, of music, and if you really want a very strict technical breakdown of what the music is, it's a lot of dominant and minor sevenths. For the most part it's pretty modal. And there's usually a key change somewhere. [Laughs] And it also tends to be very syncopated musically.

JK: Yeah, syncopation is like a heartbeat.

MO: What are some of Barefoot Junction's musical influences? Or non-musical influences?

JK: You first. [Points to Graham]

GR: Um...beer.

JK: Beer.
GR: ...Weed.

JK: Weed.

GR: Um...and musically? I'd say it's very...oh, god...

JK: We've got some nice Led Zeppelin-y feels going on there.

GR: Actually, I'd say it's almost like Rage Against the Machine, if they didn't use distortion, and quieted down a little bit.

JK: But like, crossbred with like, well I wouldn't say Tower of Power, but someone equally as funky.

GR: Yeah...sort of like Chili Peppers meets Rage--

JK: Yeah, the Chili Peppers analogy is very good.

GR: But it doesn't take on the—for me at least it doesn't take on the aggressiveness of that music. It's more laid back and party, fun music.

JK: I mean, I know Benjie is very much influenced by Medeski, Martin & Wood in his bass lines.

GR: What I've noticed is somebody—he's very syncopated, and he's a big fan of—he lays down a bass line that's usually based off of a major minor pentatonic--

JK: It's groovin', man.

GR: And then he adds a LOT of chromatic interjections in between. He's also very—the reason I like playing with him, is that when you play in a trio, the biggest problem is covering. Covering frequency and covering space. You've got a lot of open space, and you've only got three guys covering it. With a bassist usually, also they're going to be playing one note. And what I think Jared and Benjie do very well is they take up a lot of space.

JK: I also don't know how to play quietly.

GR: [Laughs] Benjie's bass lines are very active. Jared's drumming is very active. They both take up a lot of space, which is great for me because whenever I've played in a trio, on piano or guitar, sometimes you get this problem of trying to solo, and you're not taking up enough space. Especially if you're doing single lines. But in this band I feel like I'm free to go a lot of places because of the space they take up. I don't have to occupy too much frequency.

JK: We play off of each other very well.

MO: Any last words?

JK: Fuck bitches, get money?

GR: Shut up and blow me.