

Real songs of real eccentricity

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The Intelligencer

Caravan of Thieves blends musicianship with lyrical tales of the bizarre.

They may not necessarily be good for you.

But if you're weary of the heavily manufactured sounds and slick production values that dominate much of mainstream music today, then Caravan of Thieves promises to at least provide a satisfying alternative.

"We're not the McDonald's of music," says Fuzz Sangiovanni, who shares the quartet's vocal and acoustic guitar-playing duties with his wife, Carrie. "We're pretty open to most kinds of music, but we know there's a lot out there that's kind of like the junk food of music.

"We're not overly processed; we're real musicians playing real songs."

Those songs are soaked in a gleeful melange of influences that, while obviously steeped in gypsy swing, bear elements of everything from chamber pop and 1920s hot jazz to vaudeville, folk and bluegrass. The diversity is in part attributable to the individual band members' backgrounds.

Some may recall Fuzz as the lead guitarist with funk-roots-rock band Deep Banana Blackout, as well as a touring guitarist with the Tom Tom Club. He and Carrie, who previously traveled the more traditional acoustic singer-songwriter path, also performed in the alternative rock band Rolla before becoming an acoustic duo.

When looking to further expand their musical direction, they brought in violinist Ben Dean, who'd been sitting in on the occasional set with them and came from a predominantly classical background, and double bassist Brian Anderson, who boasted extensive jazz experience.

"I remember Brian being this really animated upright bass player, which is not a usual thing. Usually, you see this cool kind of guy, bopping his head," says Carrie. "He was like the Muppets' Animal behind the drum kit but with the bass."

That kind of frenetic energy would play perfectly into Caravan of Thieves. Since forming just a little more than a year ago, the Bridgeport, Conn.-based band has already generated impressive buzz for its debut CD "Bouquet" and its engaging, high-intensity live shows.

"I've been listening to gypsy jazz probably for more than 10 years now. It was never anything I ever thought I would do musically," says Fuzz. "But everybody had some background in it in the group + and we wanted to do something that wasn't like anything else out there.

"We're trying to go for something that's kind of timeless but at the same time definitely looks back to 1930s swing and gypsy jazz but even goes back further and has an older feel to it but with a modern twist."

There's also an element of deliberate creepiness, from the vintage-looking album cover featuring a sly youngster holding a bouquet of flowers to lyrics that reference a murderous butcher's wife, a boy-turned-blood-sucking-bug and ill-fated lovers tossed to the bottom of the sea.

Ghosts, caged angels and rattlesnakes that charm are all among the kooky characters inhabiting these songs, with one track, the aptly titled "Freaks," pointing to a shameless appreciation for the unusual. Fuzz acknowledges that the album is broken into three acts - with an instrumental piece serving as the intermission before the concluding song cycle - "because each part gets a little bit more bizarre."

While artists such as Django Reinhardt and Duke Ellington are among the band's musical influences, they credit Tim Burton as the inspiration behind much of their lyrical imagery. Fuzz and Carrie, who are the group's primary songwriters, also draw ideas from books - such as Reinhardt's biography and the works of Dr. Seuss and Edgar Allan Poe - and pastimes that include leisurely walks through the Mountain Grove Cemetery near their home, which is the resting place of the late circus founder P.T. Barnum.

"That's often a source of inspiration because it's not a scary place - it's actually a beautiful place," says Fuzz. "We've even brought our guitars down there a few times and played and we've taken a few photos down there as well. Maybe we are exposed more to the gateway of the afterlife because of that and it's kind of made its way into our mind and our music."

But Carrie insists that the duo is not morbid. Nor does the spectral play as significant a role in their lives as the album's lead track "Ghostwriter" may suggest, with its allusions to a boundlessly creative spirit who regales her and her husband with tales from beyond "the great divide."

"Our place is not a haunted house and we don't get out a Ouija board and call on spirits. But when we write a song and come up with an idea, we can't really pinpoint where it comes from, so it's kind of a fun way to put something to that and have this ghost actually visit us from the other side and give us these wild ideas for wacky characters and otherworldly stories. We kind of play around with that," says Carrie.

But for all its witty humor and frivolous fun, Caravan of Thieves, which performs Friday at World Cafe Live in Philadelphia, takes its music seriously, blending sweet harmonious and entrancing melodies with fiery arrangements to accompany their strange and often comical narratives.

"We definitely want to share the notion that music is first and foremost an art and it's something that you want to put yourselves into completely and not do halfway," says Fuzz.

"It's not like we need a lot of sounds and effects and amplifiers and gimmicks. We're simply just musicians playing this music and performing it and putting our heart and soul into it, and it's the emotion and energy that you put into it that really makes it work."

Caravan of Thieves appears Friday Upstairs at World Cafe Live, 3025 Walnut St., Philadelphia. Show time: 9 p.m. Tickets: in advance, \$10; day of show, \$12. Information: 215-222-1400; www.worldcafelive.com.

December 01, 2009 09:48 AM

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