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Rebels With Applause

Unruly Blues Makes its Own Rules for Playing to a Crowd

By Lori Rypka | Photography by Jamie Turner

The blues genre of music may have its roots in the Deep South, but its penetration into jazz, rock 'n' roll and other areas—both culturally and geographically—has made it ubiquitous. Popularly known for its melancholic choruses and familiar chords, musicians over the years have put their own spin on blues. And then there's Unruly Blues, a Frederick-based band that is building a cult following for performances that leave audiences anything but blue.

"There's something to be said about keeping live music alive," says lead singer Saskia Van Oot. At a recent gig at Glory Days Grill in Germantown, the Unruly Blues not only had people dancing in the aisles, but also singing along as the band performed popular blues staples like "Mustang Sally." Crowd participation and involvement is key for band members, as they walked around the room getting elbow to elbow—or elbow to guitar neck—with their audience.





Above: Dale Hayman wails on the harp during a recent Unruly Blues performance. **Right:** The husband-and-wife team of guitarist Lance Nuckolls and lead singer Saskia Van Oot is the heart and soul of the band.

Unruly Blues has an eclectic—and sometimes decidedly “adult”—style that leaves their fans clamoring for more. The synergy of the group is infused in the excitement for the tunes they play. Musical influences include greats such as Etta James, Billie Holliday, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, and others. The sound may be familiar, but the words often are not. Van Oot often reworks lyrics to songs to give them more of an “unruly” flavor, usually saving the devilishly altered songs like “Fix My Car” for later in the evening when kids are no longer in the audience.

NOTABLE START

Like many bands, Unruly Blues started out as a group of friends sharing a love for music. After many jam sessions of electric blues, rumba, rock zydeco and twist-inspired blues in the Urbana basement of Van Oot and her husband, guitarist Lance Nuckolls, the group tested the waters in 2007 at a number of “open mic” blues jams across the country. Soon after, they started to get their own gigs, while refining their unique sound: The band has no keyboard, no second guitar and no sax, which can make creating a bluesy sound a challenge. “Everyone has to be in there,” says Nuckolls, or the sound just won’t work.

Obviously, this is a group of people that knows how to have a good time. Even rehearsals are steeped in fun and excitement. Deep in the flamingo-themed basement of Van Oot and Nuckolls’ home, the band rehearses every Monday night. The room is decked out in colored Christmas lights, guitars are mounted to the walls and a life-sized image of Chewbacca from “Star Wars” peeks out from behind drummer Michael D’Onofrio.



The band has gone through a number of musician members before seeming to settle in with the current group of five. Van Oot and Nuckolls, as original members, have watched this group evolve until the combination struck the right chord. Other band members include D’Onofrio, software developer/bass player Skip James and Dale Hayman on harmonica.

“This is the best combination of people we’ve had together,” says Van Oot. Nuckolls agrees, saying that this combination of people all contributes to the direction of the band, providing critical feedback and recommendations for change.

CHANGE IN TUNE

“Blues, in and of itself, is probably the most often stolen or copied genre,” Nuckolls says. Once the group hears a song it likes, the members pull together a different arrangement and Saskia may rewrite the words. “I like to say that we play your Side B,” says D’Onofrio. “It may not be heard as Top 40, but the people that sing it are famous.”

Eric Scheidhauer, manager at Glory Days Grill in Germantown, was sold on Unruly Blues the first time he heard them. They offer “a little more upbeat blues, which is hard to do,” he says. Commenting on Van Oot’s off-the-wall interaction with the crowd, he says, “At first, you



A blues band without a strong beat would be like barbecue ribs without a dry rub. Providing the noteworthy rhythm to Unruly Blues is bassist Skip James (above) and drummer Michael D’Onofrio.

don’t know what to think of her, then she gets crazy with the crowd in an upbeat bluesy way.” He gives the band the ultimate compliment: “I wasn’t a blues fan until I saw them.”

At a time when many bars and clubs are trusting their music to DJs instead of live bands, mainly because of the economy, finding good locations to play is becoming increasingly difficult, says Nuckolls. Long-term thinking venues will keep live music, he says, but the gigs are unfortunately harder to come by in this economy.

Nonetheless, for these musicians it’s more about the music than the money. “People in bands do it because they love to do it,” Nuckolls says. This certainly isn’t full-time work. A safety inspector for the Federal Aviation Administration, he adds, “if I could quit my job tomorrow and get paid full-time [to be a musician], I’d do it in a heartbeat. We all would.” ❖

