

KRISTIN ANDREASSEN:

*"We've each had love relationships that have started and/or ended in the course of this band, we've seen each other move to new places and start and end other projects, and cut our hair, and grow our hair. This band is up there in the pantheon with your family and things you can't get rid of."*

by KATY JUNE-FRIESEN

THE SUM OF THE ambition that first brought Uncle Earl together was quite modest: to play the old-time and string-band music they adored with like-minded people. Their audience was negligible, so if it initially seemed a dubious endeavor, well, no matter. At least they were having a marvelous time. "This band wasn't making any money, this band made no sense in any way," says fiddler Rayna Gellert. "I kept doing it because I wanted to be spending time with these people. So it's kind of a bonus that people actually want to hear us."

In the last couple years, the band's spirited music and onstage verve has gained Uncle Earl greater distinction than they ever expected. After releasing the acclaimed *She Waits For Night* (produced by old-time aficionado Dirk Powell) in 2005, they're now touring behind the March release of their second Rounder Records disc, *Waterloo, Tennessee* (produced by Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones).

When founder KC Groves began the band in 1999 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, it was to support a one-record venture into traditional material recorded with her friend Jo Serrapere, 2000's self-released *She Went Upstairs*. Live shows promoting the album went over well, and the project and personnel began to evolve. Slowly. For the nearly four years the current lineup has been together, they've divided their lives between other bands, a variety of solo projects, and Uncle Earl. They live states apart: Gellert in Asheville, North Carolina; Groves in Lyons, Colorado; banjo player Abigail Washburn in Nashville, Tennessee; and multi-instrumentalist and clogger Kristin Andreassen in Boston, Massachusetts.

In the last year or so, their lives have come to orbit around Uncle Earl. "It seems like because of our prioritizing the band, really great things are happening for us, and I don't know how easy it's actually going to be to turn it down again for another year," Washburn says. "It seems like with this band, any ounce of effort we put into it exponentially returns."

"It's the hot dudes, man," Andreassen jokes.

"The drugs and the hookers," Gellert responds. Which inevitably leads to a cheeky tale from their long road.

One night in California, some years back, Andreassen was put in charge of navigating toward a gig in Fresno. "We left San Francisco and drove two hours in the wrong direction," she says. "We arrived fifteen minutes after our show was supposed to start and there were two people in the room, both of whom were there by mistake. Then they ordered us pizza, probably because they felt sorry for us."

"And then," says Groves, "a hooker almost broke into our hotel room later that night. An angry hooker. She actually did damage to the door."

"Yeah," says Gellert. "I would say that is the moment when we knew [the band] was going to take off."

On the lineup this year at festivals including Merlefest, Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival and Bonaroo, following an unexpectedly popular U.K. tour, Uncle Earl has also become a kind of holding ground for each of their extended lives, musical and beyond. Their performances incorporate Washburn's study of Chinese language and culture, Andreassen's dancing, each of their songwriting (Andreassen is a finalist for the John Lennon Children's Song of the Year), and pieces of their historical research interests. Travel between gigs is filled with political discussion and gossip — truly, they rarely shut up.

"This job is our lifestyle, it's our friendship, it's what we do," says Andreassen. "And interestingly enough, I think that one of the things that's happened now is we've been together long enough for this to be one of the more constant things in each of our lives. We've each had love relationships that have started and/or ended in the course of this band, we've seen each other move to new places and start and end other projects, and cut our hair, and grow our hair. This band is up there in the pantheon with your family and things you can't get rid of."

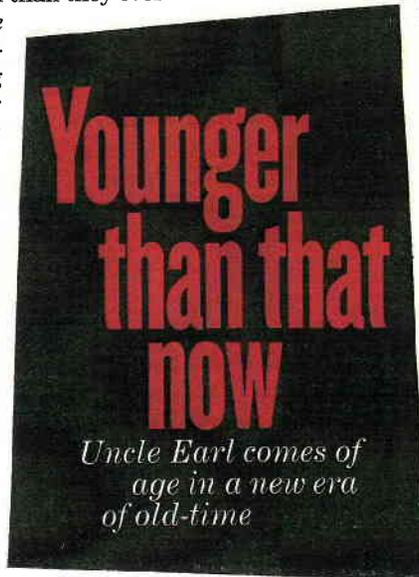
Perhaps this closeness has something to do with being an all-female group, but Gellert (yes, she says, she was a women's studies major) gets tired of the "all-girl" gimmick. It's an easy description of who they are, but hardly useful in describing

their music. "I'm frustrated that we have to be an *all-girl* string band. It's always frustrating to me to have things put in gendered terms about the way we play music."

Andreassen's issue is more with genre than gender. "I'm less frustrated being characterized as 'all female,'" she says. "I'm more frustrated by being characterized as 'bluegrass.' I think it's at least accurate that we're all females, and I cannot believe how many articles and posters and flyers and even the radio dude in London will constantly talk about us as a bluegrass group. If people are going to call us a bluegrass group, we are the worst bluegrass group that ever existed."

And so it is fitting that they met their new producer at Merlefest, which is not quite a bluegrass festival. "Just before

*Uncle Earl* (clockwise from top left): Abigail Washburn, Rayna Gellert, KC Groves, and Kristin Andreassen. Photographed in Nashville, TN, by Brydget Carrillo.





Binky Records



# www.BinkyRecords.com

Rumors of our demise have been greatly exaggerated... mostly by us. But we are back... back with a vengeance!



Diamonds in the Asphalt \$15.00

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina wiped out much of New Orleans and all of the Lower 9th Ward. For more than a decade, the Lower 9th served as home base for Mike West and his famed little studio, the 9th Ward Pickin' Parlour (yes, the same place that Shawn Mullins named his new CD after). Mike and his wife Katie, better known as Truckstop Honeymoon, packed up the kids and what little remained and relocated to Lawrence, Kansas. With such disaster as a backdrop, you might expect a depressing new CD. You would be wrong. "Diamonds in the Asphalt," like the previous Truckstop Honeymoon CDs, is just flat out fun!



Truckstop Honeymoon \$15



Christmas in Ocala \$15



Delivery Boy \$15



Coming to DVD this summer:  
*I Won't Let the Angels Take You Away*  
A Film by Nathan King Miller

Last year, film maker Nathan King Miller packed a bag and tagged along with Mike, Katie and the kids. The resulting full length documentary tells the story of a traveling musical family and their post-Katrina life. *I Won't Let the Angels Take You Away* is a gripping look at the real music world.



Dutch singer/songwriter/guitarist Ad Vanderveen is back with another stellar CD, *Cloud of Unknowing*. Best known as the leader of the major label band "Personell" and for his harmonic partnership with Iain Matthews and Eliza Gilkyson, Ad's solo records are some of the finest and most melodic that Americana music has to offer. Musicians who tour in Europe are well aware of Ad's talents. It's time for the rest of us to discover him.

More great music by Ad Vanderveen:



The Moment That Matters



Late Bloomer



More Than A Song

Binky/Squirrel/UTR Records are distributed by Select-O-Hits.



Check out our online store for some great Squirrel & Truckstop Honeymoon gear!

Squirrel - It's Not Just For Breakfast • Squirrel - Nature's Little Speedbumps  
Squirrel - It's What's For Supper • Squirrel - The Other White Meat

T-Shirts • Hoodies • Bumper Stickers • Sampler CDs • Koozies • More

the Saturday night jam," John Paul Jones says, "I went into the green room and there was a little trio of fiddlers playing there. It was Bruce Molsky, Darol Anger, and Rayna. It was just mesmerizing." Jones met the rest of Uncle Earl in Colorado at the Rockygrass festival, where they invited him and Chris Thile to their show at a local bar. The two ended up jamming with the band all night on their mandolins. Jones now plays a fiddle Gellert helped him pick out.

Uncle Earl first asked Thile to produce, but he was too busy. So they figured, "We'll just ask John Paul Jones!" Groves recalls. "I said it in jest, and then all of the sudden everyone turned to me very seriously and said, 'That's a good idea.' We just knew that we really liked him and he was really funny and had a great spirit."

When Gellert e-mailed him about producing, he'd just bought *She Waits For Night* and was charmed by the spontaneity and joy of the band's music. Jones and Uncle Earl spent a month in their friend Bela Fleck's Nashville home and in a residential studio outside the city. "We set all the players up in a circle in a nice big room," says Jones, "And the music just came. It came and came and came." He concedes it's one of the best times he's ever had producing: "We laughed for a month."

On the new disc, the group's signature fiddle tunes and old-time romps and ballads are accompanied by shape-note singing, a bluegrass tune, blues, Scotch-Irish ballads, and more originals than on the first album. There's a closeness and warmth to the sound that goes beyond *She Waits For Night*.

New songs evolved from the ethic of collaboration that brought the group together in the beginning. "One True", for example, began as a late-night, alcohol-infused fiddle jam at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia. "We had been talking about the four chord — like, 'how cool is the four chord?' — and gave ourselves an exercise to write a song that started with a four

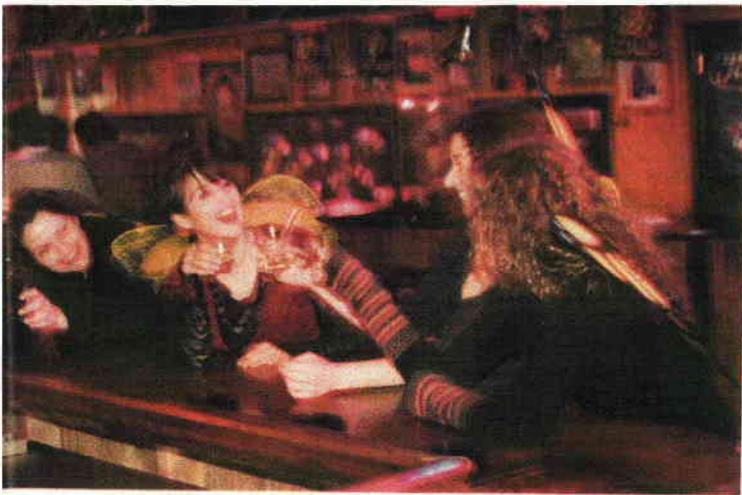
chord," Andreassen recalls. Washburn composed part of the rambling, "crooked" melody — it repeats every six beats, then goes to an eight-beat chorus. Later, when Andreassen decided to add lyrics, no one remembered the song or how it came to be. But she had proof on a minidisc recorder.

For a medley of "Buona parte" and "Bony On The Isle Of St. Helena", Andreassen collected musical material about Napoleon from a variety of sources, one of which was *The Social Harp* shape note songbook. "We were rearranging in our pop-string-band kind of way," says Groves, "and we all got excited about the idea of actually singing the parts at the beginning of the song. We're nerds."

"Streak O' Lean, Streak O' Fat" (played as "Hell Broke Loose In Georgia" by the Skillet Lickers) puts Washburn's fluent Chinese to work. A recording by Seven Foot Dillie & His Dill Pickles featured Dillie monologuing over the music, and when Washburn brought the music to the band, says Gellert, "I was just missing that kind of patter. It just cracked me up to think of having that patter in Mandarin, and Abby just ran with the idea." It just so happens that Mao Zedong's favorite dish, hongshou rou, features a small streak of lean meat and a big streak of fat. At first listen, it's not clear that Washburn's hollering is in Mandarin.

The group was compelled by the title of one of Gellert's favorite raging fiddle tunes, "Wish I Had My Time Again", so they wrote lyrics about wrongful imprisonment. Gellert composed "D & P Blues" (drinking and promiscuity) and a classic bluegrass song, "Drinker Born". The closing meditation, "I May Never", is a collaboration between Groves and her mother; Groves says it's an outgrowth of being raised reading and memorizing Robert Frost. "Poetry from that era has meter and these perfect rhymes," she says.

The bulk of *Waterloo* is original writing and arranging, but there's also a raw, aching version of Ola Belle Reed's



Uncle Earl quaffing cold remedies in Nashville, TN.

"Epitaph", belted by Washburn, and an old-time, Cajun-triangle treatment of Bob Dylan's waltz "Wallflower". King Wilkie's Ted Pitney wrote a wistful tune for the band, "The Last Goodbye", recorded with Gillian Welch on drums.

For their low end, Uncle Earl keeps a roster of favorite bass players, including Erin Youngberg, who has toured with the group and played on *Waterloo*. Jones also played bass on the record, as well as adding some piano and mandola. Sharon Gilchrist, who played on their first album, lately has been playing mandolin with the Peter Rowan and Tony Rice Quartet. For Uncle Earl's spring tour, Mary Lucey of the Biscuit Burners traveled with them.

The band is surprised to find themselves amidst what some characterize as an exploding old-timey movement fueled by young bands. "I certainly didn't start playing this kind of music because it was any kind of fad," says Andreassen. "I was the youngest person in the room usually. I feel like this band started before there was a craze, before it was a trend. We are lucky right now, because we seem to be finding an audience that thinks this music is a trend." She attributes it to young people who grew up with over-produced electric music becoming intrigued by music that "maybe feels a little more real or more participatory."

That may be Andreassen's experience as a former rocker kid, but her bandmates all came to traditional music from different places. Gellert grew

up with it; her father is old-time fiddle, banjo and guitar player Dan Gellert, and she's an authority in the old-time fiddle world. Groves comes from a bluegrass background and is active in the Colorado acoustic music scene. She grew up listening to country music and visiting her grandmother's church in West Virginia, where the singing was unaccompanied. Andreassen became interested in traditional music when she moved from Oregon to Cape Breton Island (in Nova Scotia, Canada) and encountered Scottish music and step-dancing. Washburn lived in China and became intrigued by the idea of cultural traditions there; then she heard an LP of Doc Watson playing clawhammer.

Yet sometimes Uncle Earl's members feel like elders in this new old-time-influenced community. Groves remembers being strangely downhearted at one Yonder Mountain String Band show as she surveyed the college-age crowd. She realized she wasn't bummed because she was feeling old; rather, "I was bummed out because when I was their age, that didn't exist. What I would have done for a scene like that when I was like 20, or early part of college, because that's the kind of music I loved back then. But man, I was a freak show...there were very few people, and they were all like 40-year-old dudes." 

*Katy June-Friesen has been sitting next to 40-year-old dudes at concerts for years. She is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.*

# Jesse Sykes & The Sweet Hereafter

## Like Love Lust

### & The Open Halls of the Soul

"Her best record yet. The songs are simultaneously catchier and darker. Her voice has grown deeper, richer, and spookier, alternately evoking Cat Power, Grace Slick, and Karen Dalton."

- Paste (★★★★)

"More intoxicating than ever. Forget the usual alt-country tag, this is simply a wonderful record."

- Q (★★★★)

"Those already familiar with Sykes are in for a mild shock - her third LP rocks like Crazy Horse."

- Uncut (★★★★)



barsuk records