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This outfit is new

Young band finds itself wanderin' the fast track

By Walter Tunis
CONTRIBUTING MUSIC WRITER

When Phoebe Hunt marked the day on her calendar, she thought she was simply noting another gig in another city.

To a degree, she was used to that. An industrious Austin, Texas, violinist, Hunt studied for two years at Mark O'Connor's prestigious fiddle camp and was a recipient of the Daniel Pearl Memorial Violin Award. Then, after switching studies at the University of Texas from business to history with a minor in Spanish, she immersed herself as a performer in Austin's vast live music scene.

But the concert at hand suggested an adventure. It began with a call from two Austin pals, singer-songwriter-guitarist Rob Teter and guitarist Marshall Hood. Then it entailed a drive to New Orleans to meet with bassist Jeff Brown, who had played with Teter and Hood in the now defunct DesChamps Band; pianist Connor Forsyth and drummer Jonathan Konya.

The April 2007 performance was at a festival in yet another city. So after two days of intense rehearsals and a resulting sound that began to mirror the Gypsy-flavored jazz and string-fueled swing of decades past, it was on to Wilkesboro, N.C.

Here's where the story gets a little intense. The players weren't headed for some casual bluegrass or roots-music festival. Hunt and her friends found themselves at MerleFest, one of the largest and most respected Americana music gatherings in North America. Among the acts with which they would be sharing the bill: Elvis Costello, Alison Krauss, Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, John Hammond, BZla Fleck, Peter Rowan, Tony Rice, and the roots music giant who was the inspiration for the 20-year-old festival, Doc Watson.

And instead of skipping into such extraordinary company as a long-running ensemble, Hunt and company -- who had dubbed themselves The Belleville Outfit -- were playing their very first gig after two days of rehearsal.

Now that's what you call a band entrance.

"I think Rob had originally been offered the gig," Hunt said. "He couldn't say no. But it was also a case of, 'Yes, ma'am. I have a band.' And then he started calling everyone. I didn't really know about MerleFest. I was like, 'Yeah, I'll do the gig,' and just wrote it on my calendar."

The mix of jazz, country, blues, New Orleans soul and hot swing music seemed to flow readily at MerleFest for The Belleville Outfit (Belleville is French for "beautiful town," but it also is the title of a tune by Gypsy swing guitar legend Django Reinhardt that is part of the Outfit's repertoire). But then the inevitable question arose: "Now what?"

"That's when we had to make a decision," Hunt said. "I mean, the band had come together so quickly. The decision we faced was, 'Are we going to keep doing this? That's when everyone decided to change their whole lives.'"

That meant the Outfit's New Orleans delegation gave up school (for now, at least) and moved to Austin. That meant the band hit the road for the sort of woodshedding touring experience that young acts have to endure to establish a band sound, a group spirit and a devout fan base.

The Belleville Outfit already has accomplished the latter in Lexington through shows at Natasha's Bistro, where it will play again Tuesday. Now comes the next phase, a hearty indie debut album called *Wanderin'* that was released two weeks ago.

The music is an appealing sampler of Teter tunes that run from animated swing (*Caroline*) to leisurely country strolls (*Ease My Mind*) to Western-tinged blues (*Been Here Before*). Rounding out the recording are a pair of songs by the late Austin songsmith Walter Hyatt (including a version of *Wonder Why* that mixes tropical atmospherics, a mighty New Orleans rumble and Hunt's assertive singing) and the dizzying fiddle swing of the 1946 Peggy Lee hit *It's a Good Day*.

The latter could almost be a theme song for The Belleville Outfit. Its music has a pronounced drive, yet the feel is light. It might flirt with the blues, but the resulting attitude is seldom less than exuberant. And it hints at swing, country and jazz sounds from the '40s and early '50s, but nothing of *Wanderin'* sounds like a museum piece.

"This is fun music," Hunt said. "Playing it at shows and making people happy, that's what keeps us going. It makes you feel like what you're doing matters."

The Belleville Outfit

When: 8 p.m. Feb. 19.

Where: Natasha's Bistro, 112 Esplanade.

Cover charge: \$10.

Call: (859) 259-2754.

Online: www.bellevilleoutfit.com, www.natashascafe.com.