

GARDEN & GUN

Shovels & Rope: Two for the Road



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BY MATT HENDRICKSON - AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2012

With a rollicking homegrown sound, the duo Shovels & Rope is as diggable as they come

>*Listen to Shovels & Ropes' song: Birmingham*

On a typical night before a May show in West Virginia, Shovels & Rope tandem Cary Ann Hearst and her husband, Michael Trent, spent the night in a Walmart parking lot. No, they weren't stuffed into shopping carts or folded into the backseat of a car. They lived it up in the back of their van, replete with a queen-size bed, a television, and a good bottle of red wine.

"We just like hanging out in there; it's pretty comfortable," says Hearst. "It's better than some of the fleabag motels we've stayed in." Hearst and Trent should know: The Charleston, South Carolina, couple played nearly two hundred shows in 2011 and are on pace for more this year. And judging by the buzz they've been building and the strength of their new album, *O' Be Joyful*, the crowds should keep getting bigger.

O' Be Joyful is a rough-and-ready collection of songs that sounds like a punkabilly June and Johnny Cash mixed with New Orleans horns, sixties-era harmonies, and honking organ solos. Live, they've attracted a loyal following, performing as a high-octane two-piece band and whipping up a righteous racket with guitars, harmonicas, and a drum kit harvested from a junkyard, adorned with tambourines, flowers, and kitchen rags. "Our goal is to get everyone up and dancing," says Trent with a laugh. "No one dances anymore. But then we play Asheville on a random Tuesday night and people are freaking out."

A native of Mississippi, Hearst attended the College of Charleston—"I'm a Cougar, baby," she purrs—while Trent spent time in Colorado and Texas before arriving in the Lowcountry. The two met in 2005 through the city's small but close-knit rock scene, with Trent showing up at Hearst's front door with some beer and the desire to jam on punk rock covers like the Ramones classic "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend." An apt choice, as the two quickly became romantically involved.

“I think we both wanted to be rockers; I know I did so badly,” Hearst says. “I was listening to a lot of Nirvana and old country, trying to figure out how to blend the two.” Trent’s father was a bluegrass nut, but as a kid, he showed little interest. “I wanted to get away from it as quickly as I could,” he says. “But then as I got older, I started paying attention to that as well as songwriters like Townes Van Zandt.”

Though their shows are raucous affairs, both Hearst and Trent are drawn to darker moods in their songwriting, as in “Hail Hail,” a brassy, joyful ode to rock ’n’ roll that’s cut with the macabre line “I love you till you slit my throat and swallow me whole.” Or the slithery, slinky blues of “Tickin’ Bomb.” “We wrote and recorded a lot of our record on the road, finding certain crazy characters and drawing inspiration off of that,” Trent says. “But there’s a certain lightness, too. I love Cormac McCarthy, but you have to laugh as well.”

When they’re not on the road, the duo—and their Plott Hound dog (named, you guessed it, Townes Van Zandt)—spend time at their Johns Island home just outside Charleston, making the foray to their favorite restaurant, the French-Southern hybrid Fat Hen. “Charleston is home,” Hearst says. “It’s a small scene, but it’s fierce. And we love our van, but nothing beats sleeping in your own bed.”