

SHOWBIZ

Shovels & Rope make country folk with heart and tour in a van for all seasons

Cary Ann Hearst & Michael Trent are married to their music, and each other

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Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent say they 'put 80,000 miles on our van last year.'

Shovels and Rope make ramshackle music, twanging with country rhythms and clanging with folky chords. It's rough, loose and utterly homemade.

"We don't have an aversion to nice and fancy things," says singer Cary Ann Hearst. "It's just that the way we recorded this album lent itself to that sound." That way can best be described as on the fly. They captured the core of the songs at their rustic home studio in Charleston, S.C. Then, in frantic spurts, they added musical parts in vans and hotel rooms, all while madly crisscrossing the country on tour. "We had no time to be grandiose," the band's other member, Michael Trent, says understatedly.

Especially since they had no budget. They reference that point directly in the lyrics to "Birmingham," the first song off their new CD, "O Be Joyful." The pair's lyrics include: "Making something out of nothing, with a scratch and a hope, two old guitars, like a shovel and a rope."

"Making something out of nothing is our motto in life," Hearst says. To prove it, the words are printed on the band T-shirts, but translated into Latin since it sounds cooler that way ("Creatio Ex Nihilo").

They'll bring that spare philosophy and tumble-down sound to Mercury Lounge Thursday.



**Hearst and Trent make up
Shovels & Rope, a duo from
Charleston, S.C.**

Even the pair's decision to become a formal duo was something of a stumble. They originally planned to work as solo artists. Each worked in his or her own band when they first came to Charleston — Hearst arriving from Nashville, Trent from Texas. In 2005, they recorded their own CDs, but since each contributed so much to the other's work, they elected to record an album under both their names in 2008.

They called that project "Shovels and Rope" because of the large number of murder ballads it included. Only later did they decide to take that same name for the group itself.

It didn't hurt that, along the way, the two not only became romantically involved, they also got married. Even so, Hearst says, "It was a harder decision to form the band than it was to decide that we would spend the rest of our lives together." According to Trent, some of the decision came from public demand. "The phone was starting to ring with people saying they'd seen this duo playing at this bar and would they go on tour," he says.

That happened so often, the couple wound up "putting 80,000 miles on our van last year," according to Hearst.

All the wear-and-tear had a clear effect on the writing. The songs on "O' Be Joyful" name-drop so many cities, they could double as travelogues. "Once you see all these places with your own eyes," Trent says, "you can more clearly visualize the way they figure in how you put a story together." Adds Hearst, "The highway becomes a character in your life."

Shovels and Rope know something about characters. They put them in most of their songs, preferring to write in the third person, rather than the first.

“You can only write so many songs about your own feelings,” Trent says. “Plus, there’s not a lot of moaning in us. We try to stay positive and put ourselves in other people’s shoes.”

The new album retains a few murder ballads, including one particularly gory tale about a butcher and his comeuppance. Hearst says they’re drawn to such stories because “of the drama.”

Hearst gives their scrappy characters a sense of place with her hard accent, which is as Southern as lard. “The songs are written in that accent,” she says. The sound suits the unkempt nature of the whole project, but it makes one wonder: What would Shovels and Rope sound like, if somehow they were showered with funds and luxury?

“We would probably make a record very similar to this one,” answers Hearst. “We’d just record it in nicer hotel rooms.”