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Music

For neo-folkies Darlingside, one mic is plenty

By Lauren Daley | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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For Darlingside, the magic happened when they took three microphones away.

It was a deceptively simple move that took the Boston-based string quartet years to figure out. But when they did — on their 2015 sophomore album, “Birds Say” — a new sound emerged, a new niche and new fanbase, said bassist Dave Senft, 32, of Waltham.

Because any way you slice it, when four upper-register male voices sing in harmony around one microphone — if they do it well — they inevitably will be compared to Simon & Garfunkel, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, and/or the Beach Boys.

“We didn’t strive to sound like the Beach Boys, but we’ll take it,” said guitarist-banjoist Don Mitchell, 34, of Waltham. “One of most common [comparisons] we get is Crosby Stills Nash & Young, because we’re four men in harmony, but none of us would [cite] them as a major influence. I mean, I grew up with the Beach Boys in the car, for sure, but I never thought they were cool — my mom listened to them.”

This last line makes Senft laugh. “We don’t try to sound like any band,” he agrees.

Rounded out by fiddler-mandolinist Auyon Mukharji of Cambridge and cellist-guitarist Harris Pasetliner of Waltham, Darlingside is a bold-roast blend of coffeehouse folk, sparse lyrical poetry, '70s-era male harmonies, bluegrass strings, and dreamy ambience. Lyrically, they're apt to allude to David Foster Wallace and Super Mario Brothers. Sonically, their sensibilities lie somewhere between Brian Wilson and Brian Eno.

The Williams College alumni met in the mid-aughts as members of the college's all-male a cappella group.

"I was a total a cappella geek as a kid. I was definitely looking forward to singing in college," says Senft.

"I sang anywhere and everywhere from age 8 onwards," says Mitchell. "I did musical theater and choir in high school at Deerfield Academy." He pauses before admitting: "I was briefly in a rock band that exclusively covered Dave Matthews and Rage Against the Machine."

While a cappella brought them together, it was a songwriting course that "made us realize songwriting was part of our lives," says Senft, who was a math major. "I never considered being a professional musician, but then you start writing songs and get addicted. When you find friends who are also addicted to songwriting, it turns into a bigger thing."

The course also gave them their name: Their instructor would cite Arthur Quiller-Couch's advice to young writers to "murder your darlings."

"So Darlingside was a cheeky play on that — like pesticide, or fratricide," Mitchell says. "But we changed the C to S, so it isn't super morbid."

They eventually moved into a house together in Hadley, near Northampton, around 2009.

"All our friends were going to grad school or getting well-paying jobs, and we were moving into a house together and playing music without a clear idea of where to go next," says Senft.

"In 2010, we were playing any gigs offered," Mitchell adds. "We played a gig in a candy store. We busked at farmers' markets for rutabaga or cabbage."

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Eventually, the four moved to Boston and worked with producer Dan Cardinal for their second and third albums. It was their second album that thrust the quartet into the national spotlight. They found themselves in Rolling Stone and praised on NPR. They opened for Patty Griffin, and saw mainstage time at the UK's Cambridge Folk Fest.

Their third album, "Extralife," now takes them on tour from Seattle to Glasgow, with two hometown shows: a sold-out date Thursday at the Sinclair in Cambridge, and Saturday at the Academy of Music Theatre in their former stamping grounds of Northampton.

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"'Extralife' has a literal meaning from the video game, but also a second meaning, as in a starting over, or rebirth," says Senft. "My own deeper meaning is that it focuses on the extra in life — when you make it big, and you're looking for the next thing. And also, I just had a son, so there's one extra life in my house."

Mitchell says the album also describes various dystopian visions. "When we got down to writing, it was around the 2016 election, and we were anxiously looking toward the future."

The band just announced that they'll play Newport Folk Fest this summer, which also has them a bit on edge, Mitchell says.

"We're very excited, but a little nervous because of its history with Bob Dylan going electric. We'll be bringing our synthesizer, so if people are expecting us to play traditional bluegrass . . ."

Mitchell lets the sentence hang and laughs. "Some people call us bluegrass, but we're just the trappings of bluegrass — mandolin, fiddle, acoustic guitar, one microphone."

DARLINGSIDE

At the Sinclair, Cambridge, March 22 (sold out). At the Academy of Music Theatre, Northampton, March 24 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets \$20-\$25,

www.darlingside.com/shows

Lauren Daley can be reached at ldaley33@gmail.com.