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Three's Company (The Crooners)

By: Natasha Li Pickowicz

Inspired by the tradition of busking, Nyles Fitzgerald decided to form a band. Armed with a Master's degree in French film and theory, Fitzgerald and two of his best friends have temporarily left the streets to release their latest record, *So Many Places*.

A mix of blues classics, Americana roots rock, and old-timey standards, *So Many Places* is the collective effort of Fitzgerald, the band's unofficial ringleader and washtub bass player, Chris Merkley, the guitarist and harmonica player, and Kevin Denton, the other guitarist (all three share vocal duties). But they've kept themselves busy doing other things, too - like a rock documentary in the works (they have over 100 hours of raw footage), and a music video due out by the end of the year. The Crooners return to Ithaca eager to play to a familiar audience after years of touring Europe (they just finished a successful European summer tour), NYC, and, in particular, the streets of Paris.

"Paris is great because people come from all over the world," Merkley said. "The culture is based on a very lively arts and street European people for some reason like American roots music."

It's an interesting phenomenon that explains their success across the pond, and Merkley, with his unflagging enthusiasm, has a lot to say. "We're the young country, and that's what we've got going on for us - the music," Merkley says. "[With Europeans] there's a much classical rooting with music, but we've had more cultural turmoil to spark the arts, like slavery and the blues, 60s protest music Vietnam War. Art becomes a vehicle to express change. Europe is more an amorphous blob that changes slowly over time, and offers a big breath of fresh air."

Although they grew up together, their foundation as a band was set when they were all undergrads at Cornell - Fitzgerald was a film major, Merkley was pursuing landscape architecture, and Denton was in architecture school. "That's actually how the whole thing much originated," Merkley recalls. "Nyles was over in Paris for a study abroad program, but he ended up doing a documentary and street musicians there."

It didn't take long before Fitzgerald met up with Merkley and Denton, and soon, all of their divergent influences came together. Merkley remembers it, he had the blues knowledge, Fitzgerald loved hip-hop, jazz, and swing, and Denton brought his love of rock and roll, funk, rockabilly, jazz. "Our earliest point of intersection was the 1920s," Merkley says. "That really inspires all the other kinds of music we were play rock and roll, funk, rockabilly, jazz. And we dangerously bordered on a country band at times. We try not to be too clichéd, but want to get back to the roots of things."

The Crooners combine the tradition of energetic, fast-paced street busking - of which they became well known in the streets of Ithaca where they spent many months - with a more refined, professional live show. "For indoor shows, we can be a little more versatile," Merkley says. "It's a different show. Street playing has to be super high energy so you can reach as many people as possible. In a club, we can slow things down a bit."

Although Merkley cites classic rock giants like Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix as first loves, lately, he's been name checking more modern bands like The White Stripes, Black Rebel Motorcycle, and The Black Keys as favorites. "These are bands that are really good at combining good roots blues to modern rock. They're very rootsy bands, but it's modern and it's cool and it's new. They haven't reinvented the wheel but they definitely have their own thing going."

Merkley insists that they aren't a revival band, either. "I wouldn't necessarily say we're trying to revitalize anything," Merkley says cautiously. "We just keep it alive and keep it true to who we are. Obviously, it was a different time; we're not trying to copy and paste into something. We want to be better than a cover band!" he laughs.

"The blues has been recycled and recycled, and at a point it gets so discouraging," Merkley sighs. "It gets to the point where you even want to say that you play the blues! You get accused of playing the blues, even though you never said you did. We want to get to the essence of the music and relate to it in our own way, and conveying some level of sincerity in the process."

The Crooners' CD release party will be 10pm, Thurs. Oct 12 at Castaways. n



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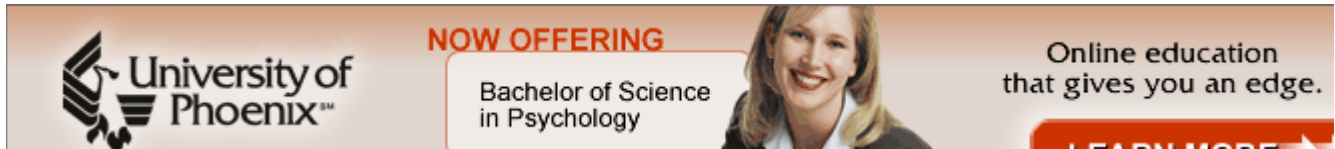
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