

The Columbian

Caravan of Thieves fill shows with fun

Live performances feature new material, interactive aspects



Gypsy jazz ensemble Caravan of Thieves will perform on Nov. 8 at the Alberta Rose Theater in Portland.

By Alan Sculley for The Columbian

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Many bands and solo artists hesitate to debut new material on tour before the new CD is out, preferring to wait until after the release date, when fans have had a chance to hear and get familiar with the new music.

Caravan of Thieves is not one of those bands. In fact, a number of songs on the Connecticut-based group's latest CD, "The Funhouse," had already been part of the group's live shows for months before they were released.

So fans that had previously discovered the unique musical stylings of Caravan of Thieves already had an idea of what to expect when "The Funhouse" arrived in April. Others are getting to hear songs from the new CD as the group tours this summer.

What they're experiencing is a group that uses acoustic instruments — with Fuzz (he keeps his last name a secret) and his wife, Carrie Sangiovanni, on guitars and vocals, Ben Dean on violin and Brian Anderson on bass (and all four members chipping in on percussion created with all manner of pots, pans, buckets and other household items) — to create a festive sound that blends swinging gypsy jazz with highly melodic pop and plenty of sweet boy/girl vocals.

The songs and performances on "The Funhouse" certainly give a sense of the spirited fun of the band's live show. The CD is built around an amusement park motif — a fitting metaphor for the Caravan of Thieves' vibe — but it also shows that Fuzz and Sangiovanni have developed into fine songwriters who write seriously memorable hooks and vocal melodies.

Songs range from the raucous "Eat You" (on which the band generates a thunderous rumble that adds a giddy jolt to the song's sweet melody) to the peppy strut of "I Can't Behave" (which is spiced up by its lively violin licks) to the melancholic sing-along feel of "Raise the Dead" (a song that has already grown into a highlight moment in the live show) to the martial tones of "Sister Went Missing," a track that adds a bit of darkness to contrast with the cheery tone of much of "The Funhouse" CD.

The music stands up just fine on its own, but in concert, Caravan of Thieves presents an experience for all of the senses. Dressed in their turn-of-the-century outfits (as in 1900, not 2000), the foursome rocks, dances and even acts out certain aspects of its songs on stage. It all makes for a highly interactive show.

“I think some people think we’re going to get up there and it’s like going to see a Broadway play or something,” Fuzz said in a recent phone interview. “It is, first and foremost, a musical concert and we’re up there playing instruments the whole time. So it’s like there’s only so much of it that can be acted out or choreographed. We don’t really choreograph anything. But we move around a lot and we have little things that we play against each other, and certain songs, certain sections of songs, call for more things where we might be speaking. We’re certainly more visual and interactive and theatrical than say your typical acoustic band or bluegrass band.”

Initially, though, it was just the “Fuzz and Carrie show” as the married couple took to the road to play acoustic duo shows in clubs, in parks, on the street — pretty much anyplace where they could break out the guitars and blend their voices without being a nuisance.

“The nice thing about it was it was just two people and two acoustic guitars and two voices,” Fuzz said. “So we felt like we could do it anywhere at any time. It was almost like a street performance. And when we were thinking about Caravan of Thieves, it was let’s just see if we can continue this idea both musically, conceptually, aesthetically, but have it be a band.”

But by 2008, a bigger vision was taking shape after Fuzz and Sangiovanni met Dean, and the violinist began sitting in at the duo’s gigs. Anderson was added not long afterward and Caravan of Thieves was born.

The band self-released a debut CD, “Bouquet,” in 2009 and followed that with a live release, “Mischief House,” in 2010. At first, the group did not have percussion as part of its sound.

But in visits to antique stores and other various venues during their touring travels, Fuzz and Sangiovanni started to collect pots, pans and other items. Borrowing a page from the stage show “Stomp,” they started to envision ways to use any number of everyday items to create the percussion ensemble that now adds considerable energy and some delightful cacophony to the group’s sound.

“It started as just a fun little idea, and now it’s become kind of an integral part of what we do,” Fuzz said.

“We have big grandiose ideas of some day having an enormous stage set with a lot of junk thrown all over the place, in front, back and sides and all of this sort of stuff,” he said cheerfully.

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