

Music

Ticket to Ride

Fuzz and Carrie's Caravan of Thieves goes mobile with its Beatles-esque melodies and gypsy-jazz style

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Text and photos by Sean Corbett



Sean Corbett photo

Standing with the Caravan of Thieves at a grand piano inside bassist Brian Anderson's loft in Read's Artspace, everyone's getting ready for the day's mobile rehearsal. Guitarist/singer Fuzz San Giovanni and violinist Ben Dean are tying Ben's necktie and guitarist/singer Carrie San Giovanni and Brian are tuning their strings. No electricity needed, of course—just legs, wood, strings and voices. There's talk of rooftops, parks, cemeteries and maybe a carnival in Wilton. But Ben can't swing the carnival; he's got a gig.

And that's all everyone knew at first, that Ben had a gig on rehearsal day. He was somewhat secretive about the whole thing; like a true thief, but it turns out he'd been hired by a guy to pop out of a bush and play violin at his marriage proposal, two hours away. And Ben needed to

learn the song on the way up, while he drove. Checking back later in the week, it was a great success and the girlfriend is now a fiancée.

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As they're starting to play in the McLevy Green in downtown Bridgeport, strangers are standing around asking questions. Some have coins and dollars ready, but there's no hat on the ground. This isn't for money, it's for fun and it's for business. Same thing really, for these guys.

Not only do they sound like they've just escaped from some sort of 1930's traveling circus, they look like it; right down to Carrie's flowing dress and their fully animated performance style and of course. Fuzz jumps, squirms, somersaults and twists like a little monkey and Ben moves his knees and elbows around like a fiddling faun from the forest. Carrie looks on knowingly, like the muse of the group, and Ben stands as the backbone, giant bass in hand. They seem tricky and mischievous on the surface, but underneath it all they're the purest and kindest of souls.

Their fast-paced gypsy jazz takes Beatles-eque melodies and harmonies and infuses them with the darkly romantic intricacies of violin-heavy Django Reinhardt tunes. Not an easy task unless you've got the perfect talent/humility balance that Fuzz, Carrie, Ben and Brian have.

None of the Thieves are strangers to the Connecticut music scene. You may remember Fuzz San Giovanni as the crazy, shirtless lead guitarist in the jazz/funk band Deep Banana Blackout, as the guitarist for the Tom Tom Club (as of 2002) or more recently from the pop/rock band Rolla he started with his wife Carrie, which has played all over the country over the last few years (and continues to do so). Fuzz and Carrie would split their time between Rolla and playing acoustic sets as a duo. The innocence and playfulness of the acoustic duo brought rise to a wave of inspiration that roused up an arsenal of new gypsy-style songs and then helped them to grow into Caravan of Thieves.

In high school, Ben Dean was the go-to electric violinist in the Hartford area, known for his flair for improvisation. While learning classical violin in school, he played in area rock bands and began to start his own wedding-centered business. Upright bassist Brian Anderson is a popular local guitar, bass, piano and vocal teacher and is also a member of the indie rock band St. Bernadette and often plays with 930 Moon. Today he balances his 30-40 students per week with his many band rehearsals and gigs. In fact, all four members are prominent area music teachers, with a combined 85 students per week.

One of Fuzz's Norwalk students, high school senior Mike Ditrio, has been with Fuzz for almost four years. He said Fuzz has opened up "a whole new world on the guitar." He said, "Fuzz has always reminded me to just relax and to keep it simple. Don't worry about things and just let it flow. Just go with it, and the music will come out right." Now, Ditrio is starting his own gypsy jazz band.

It's because of that kind of sincerity the band's songwriting is so golden. The songs are thick, strong and sturdy while still remaining airy and free.

"Bar l'sole" is a dark, fun little tune that swings and sways like a sneaky drunk on the streets of Eastern Europe trying to get in your pockets. "Rattlesnake" is another darkly dreamy song filled with alliterations like slaughterhouse, smorgasbord, suicide and sucking, "Freaks" is about the many performers you would have met had you worked at one of P.T. Barnum's neighborhood freakshows and "Billy" is probably their most playful tune, complete with buzzing violin sound effects.

Their melodies are timeless and soothing and the solos are mind-bending and fun. These are the kinds of songs you'd expect to hear in the background of the circus as the gorilla balances the elephant on his nose at center ring. But then, just as easily, inside an ancient Parisian palace. One of their perfectly-chosen covers is the Beatles' "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," which explains it all. John Lennon once told George Martin that he wanted to "smell the sawdust on the floor" of that song. Caravan of Thieves captures that, but then also lets you taste the cotton candy and the melting snow cones.

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One of the most curious things about the band is how eerily perfect they are at playing this gypsy jazz style, while most of the members are so well-known for their rock backgrounds.

To help understand this, Fuzz explained the switch from electric funk guitar in DBB to acoustic guitar in Rolla and Caravan, "it was definitely a conscious choice, because it's a sound I like, and also I like singing more. Whenever Carrie and I played acoustic sets, not only did we feel like the audience enjoyed it more, we would always sing better."

And that's what it comes down to for this group, a natural, pure sound that's nothing more than wood, strings and vocals. And without drums, just like in a Django Reinhardt band, there's even more of a demand for quality musicianship. It's within those limitations that they can truly push themselves to shine.

The Thieves don't tap into the Beatles too much, and they don't pretend to be a Django Reinhardt tribute band. Instead, they tap into their own raw energy and write songs inspired by what matters to them. They fit the part because they fit the part, not because they try to.

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Upcoming Shows:

With the Tom Tom Club @ Fairfield Theater Company, 70 Sanford St., Fairfield, 7:30 p.m.; w/ Trout Fishing in America @ Towne Crier, 130 Rt. 22, Pawling, NY, July 11, 8 p.m.; w/ St. Bernadette and the Priestess and the Fool @ Two Boots in Bridgeport, 277 Fairfield Ave., Bridgeport, July 18; Notes at Noon Series @ Yale Hospital Courtyard, New Haven, noon; Gathering of the Vibes, Seaside Park, Bridgeport, 2:30 p.m.

The Thieves also plan to record a live, in-studio album before the end of the year.

Check out more photos and upcoming shows, along with band news and criminal records @ www.caravanofthieves.com and www.myspace.com/fuzzandcarrie

<http://www.fairfieldweekly.com/article.cfm?aid=8217>