

Donna the Buffalo

Tonight, Tomorrow and Yesterday

Look around you. Consider the keepsakes you cherish, the relationships you relish, the enduring cornerstones in your life, and ask yourself how many have held steadfast since 1989. Closing in on the quarter-century mark, Donna the Buffalo has proven itself a consistent purveyor of Americana music. What's the recipe? To be sure, it's infused with more spices than you'll find at a Cajun cookout by way of a southern-fried, country bluegrass jamboree.

Over the years, the band has also built a following that proudly calls itself The Herd, along with a well-deserved reputation for crafting social narratives *and* slipstream grooves without equal. To merely call this "roots music" does it disservice, for the roots nurtured by songwriter-vocalists Jeb Puryear and Tara Nevins run wild, deep and strong—a tribute to how much Donna the Buffalo marries musical trailblazing and tradition. What other group can tackle reggae, zydeco and jam-band stylings with such abandon?

Yet even the most robust roots get tested by the seasons. And as work began on a new Sugar Hill Records release, *Tonight, Tomorrow and Yesterday*, Donna the Buffalo took an astounding leap of faith where other veteran groups would gladly phone it in.

Puryear and Nevins—joined by band members David McCracken (Hammond organ, clavinet), Kyle Spark (bass) and Mark Raudabaugh (drums)—convened in a rustic church in Enfield, New York. The building lacked running water, but overflowed with vibe enough to serve as a makeshift studio. Likewise the music poured out as the group recorded take after live take to old-school analog tape, with as few overdubs as possible. What's more, they worked without an outside producer—and suspended work on Sundays for obvious reasons: "The church had to have their services around the mess we were making," Puryear recalls.

Judging by the finished results, all messes should spin out such beautiful results. In an age of computerized this and Auto-Tuned that, *Tonight, Tomorrow and Yesterday* sounds and feels organic. Authentic. Honest. Its 14 songs serve alluring rhythms alongside thought-provoking messages; undeniable hooks infused with Nevins' distinctive fiddle and accordion work, and Puryear's rock-solid guitar locomotion. You don't have to be a longtime Herd member, or even a roots music aficionado, to embrace a record this tuneful, true and soulful.

"Sitting in a circle in the studio, you get to see everybody's insecurities," Nevins says. "Making this record was a very personal process and it was fun. On stage, the note is gone as soon as you play it. But in the studio, everything is very pristine and preserved. You've got to set your ego aside for the good of the song."

It also helps to forget any expectations fans or industry heavies might have. Donna the Buffalo had a tough act to follow in its acclaimed 2008 release *Silverlined*, which rose to No. 8 on the Americana Music Chart. The disc's tight production and radio-ready sound exposed the band to an even wider audience—so it took ample courage to strip things back for the long-awaited follow up.

“A record either has a vibe or it doesn't, and people can tell when they listen; it's the most obvious thing to them,” Puryear says. “But in the middle of it, when you're battling your insecurities, it's hard to tell whether you have that vibe, and difficult to appreciate why people like your band.”

Puryear need not have worried; one listen to the inviting album opener “All Aboard,” and you can tell the gamble was well worth it. The track comes chooglin' into the station, an infectious groove train that carries with it echoes of the Grateful Dead, Los Lobos and The Band, yet dishes a self-styled joy all its own. Puryear's message brings listeners right back to the old-time wisdom of the Golden Rule: *“Before it's too late we must fix what is not right/ Do unto others what you would like ... what you would like done unto you.”*

That song forms an apt foil for Nevins' “Don't Know What We've Got,” which approaches the living-out-love message from a breezier vantage point. Understated organ pads and Nevins' tender vocal, crowned with a gossamer harmony, gild the song beautifully. As for the lyric, she leaves room enough for the listener to make it their own anthem: “It could refer to the whole grand scheme of the world, or it could be between two people,” she says.

Nevins also delivers an equally memorable melody with “I Love My Tribe,” a sweet-strumming song that tips its hat to the Herd, but also salutes “the love of a friend” with a chorus that's undeniable, simply made for singing along with the car windows rolled down.

The record's bright feel—musically and lyrically—owes much to how Nevins and Puryear determined which tracks would make the cut. “From start to finish, we were trying to make more decisions on the positive side,” Puryear says, “to get a pile of stuff where you say, ‘That's gotta be on the record.’”

So if a song had a few superficial blemishes, as was true of the track “One Day At A Time,” it didn't matter nearly as much as the magic it conveyed. “It's loosey goosey and not exactly what you'd call completely, succinctly recorded,” Puryear says of the infectious, pot-boiling country rocker. “The guitar is a little out of tune. But it had a character to it; I had this feeling about it.”

So did Nevins, who adds: “We played it one time through in the studio, and no one knew it. What you're hearing is the take after the one run-through to learn the chords. It had this cool jangle thing going for it and everyone got really excited. But it was the hardest song to mix.”

And that's how it goes when you decide to take the road less traveled in the studio. Capturing and preserving the sound of five musicians jelling isn't a question of hitting "copy and paste;" if it's any sort of science, it's borne of trial and error, and ultimately as mysterious as alchemy.

So the final album contains six songs whose finished versions were completed in the final moments of recording. As Puryear recalls, "We recorded the whole record and there were just three days left. And one of those days, we were just in this mood where nothing sounded peppy enough. So we kept stepping it up—but when we listened back, everything was way too fast. So everybody went through their mini emotional freak-outs, and that might take 10 minutes. But we knew that we just had to get over it and do things super quick."

He adds with a laugh: "That day had a 'mayhemic' feel to it."

Still an experienced band willing to dive into deep mayhem also stands a chance of finding a pearl of great price—especially when the musicians trust each other and form a circle of unending give and take.

"It's been really fun with this lineup," Puryear says. "You get to the point where you're playing on a really high level, things are clicking and it's like turning on the key to a really good car. It just goes. It was fun to just sort of do it, go for it."

"You have to do just what you want to do, and every one likes different things," Nevins says. "Both Jeb and I come from this background of old-time fiddle music, which is very natural, very real, very under-produced, and all about coming from the gut—flying by the seat of your pants. So we have that in us, too."

In the end, the result stays true to everything Donna the Buffalo represents. You don't have to ask Puryear or Nevins before they explain to you how the group draws its inspiration from a cherished part of the American heritage: the old-time music festivals of the south that drew entire towns and counties together.

"Those festivals were so explosive, and the community and the feeling of people being with each other, that's the feeling we were shooting for in our music," Puryear says. "Donna the Buffalo is an extension of the joy we've found."

Put another way, it's love made audible—and in the most transparent way imaginable on *Tonight, Tomorrow and Yesterday*.

Puryear sums it up—how else?—from the heart: "We tried to do the record and keep in tact the things people love about us."