

PERFORMER MAGAZINE

FEATURE: The Corduroy Road

Wringing beauty from simplicity in Americana

By: John Barrett

Neo-afro-psychedelia. Industrial-post-doom metal. Lo-fi-chill-core. These are just a few examples of the multi-hyphenated genre amalgams currently flooding today's indie rock marketplace.

Proponents of these increasingly obscure, ultra-specific genres usually maintain they generate new musical possibilities. But for bands such as Athens' the Corduroy Road, plenty of musical possibilities can be found in something much purer and simpler, something that can be distilled to its essence - roots music.

The quartet's decision to focus their abilities around traditional musical styles wasn't a conscientious backlash against the inundation of new genre creations. "It's just kind of what comes out naturally in all of us," bassist Elijah NeeSmith says. Such a purist approach to music might spell homogeneity in the minds of some, but they insist the opposite is true. "That's the beauty of what people call Americana now," lead guitarist Cameron Thomas says. "It's like a license to do pretty much whatever. For us, it means nothing more than American music. There's bluesy stuff, folky stuff, country stuff, bluegrass stuff, rock-y stuff, the minor-key old-time kind of stuff...It's a very general term for being able to cover a lot of ground."

The Corduroy Road formed in 2006 as an outlet for the duo of vocalist/banjoist/harmonica player Drew Carman and vocalist/acoustic guitarist Dylan Solise, both natives of semi-rural Lexington, Ky. - an ideal atmosphere for sowing the seeds of an alt-country group. "[Drew and I] were both big fans of Old Crow Medicine Show and other bands like them who were just starting to peek their head out four or five years ago," Solise says. "That sort of music has a long tradition in Kentucky. We grew up listening to country and folk, but I didn't gain much of an appreciation for it until later on. After getting into that music, I got into the whole alt-country scene."

Among the other influences that helped to sculpt the band's vision include Uncle Tupelo and the two, more well-known groups that it spawned: Wilco and Son Volt. Originally anchored by bassist Tim Helms and drummer John Cable, the band began establishing their name within the Athens music community. In November 2008, they landed recording time with renowned local producer John Keane, famous for his work with big-leaguers like Widespread Panic and R.E.M. Under his leadership, they recorded their full-length debut, *Love Is a War*, which was released in summer 2009.

Since then, the Corduroy Road has begun to see marked regional success on the Americana circuit (including a main stage performance at Athens' annual summer festival, AthFest). However, Love Is a War proved the beginning of the end for the original outfit, with NeeSmith replacing Helms on bass shortly afterward and Thomas joining the fold around the same time. Within the past few months, Cable parted ways with the band amicably. After some searching, they settled on Brent Hedrick as the new drummer.

"I play the upright bass [as opposed to Tim's electric bass], so the sound has made things a little bit different since Love Is a War," NeeSmith says. "I think a lot of things have changed since then. The band definitely sounds different if you listen to the record." The lineup expansion has also increased their sense of texture and atmosphere, a large portion of which comes from Thomas' electric guitar. "I do a little slide and pedal steel emulation, but I just play standard electric guitar," Thomas says. "John Keane played actual pedal steel on the record, so the live setting is where I get into the emulation."

But Thomas remains attuned to Carman and Solise's original organic vision. "Effects are not really what we're about musically," he says. "I keep a tuner, a volume pedal and a tube screamer. We've got to keep it aligned with the whole simplistic thing - the more natural sound. That's the direction that we travel."

The Corduroy Road's metamorphosis extends beyond a mere shift in personnel. Thanks to the new dynamic, the band's music has adopted extra styles and moods, largely due to the addition of NeeSmith as a songwriter. In the Corduroy Road's original incarnation, Solise and Carman served as the group's creative force. Inspired by a wide spectrum of roots music, the two found their individual styles dovetailed smoothly. As a banjo and harmonica player, Carman's songs tend to be steeped in the raw, down-home style of rural bluegrass, while Solise's material sports a sunny, supremely melodic pop sensibility. The strengths of each writer's style are conjoined by the duo's "clear-eyed, resonant vocal harmonies. But the addition of NeeSmith has stirred in a touch of sorrow and darkness.

"From Love Is a War, it's about 50 percent my writing and 50 percent Dylan's," Carman says. "Now, however, in our live performances, we're incorporating a lot of Elijah's songs."

"I like sad songs, and I've been bringing some sad songs to the group - stories about bad people and tragic situations," NeeSmith says. "I really like slower songs in minor keys and things like that."

No matter the method, one thing is for certain about the Corduroy Road: their sincere, back-to-basics mentality means egos are out the window. Within the band's infrastructure, each member has comfortable room to develop his own musical ideas, but the central emphasis is on the blended overall sound. "If you're not a band of virtuosos and prodigies, then it's not about, 'Alright, what can this song contain?'" Thomas says. "It's about playing to the song and asking, 'What can these four people do with this song right now?' Not who can take the longest solo or who's going to play the best lick or

who's going to sing the best note. It's on-the-spot and you've got to make each song work individually or you've got nothing."

"Woody Guthrie once said if it's more than three chords, then you're just ?showing off," Carman says. "Not that we live by that or anything, but simple songs are sometimes the most direct and relatable. A lot of times, rootsy music tells good stories about someone's life that might be relatable to the listener."

Corduroy Road has no plans to jump back into the studio just yet, but that doesn't mean there's a lack of new material to be heard. Last month, the group unveiled its first official live album, *Live at the 40 Watt*, which is composed of previously unreleased material from January shows at Athens' legendary 40 Watt Club. Appropriately, the record was released in conjunction with a 40 Watt performance by the band. "We want to capture the energy of what we do in a live setting, which is quite different than what we did in the studio," Solise explains. "That was a very meticulous process. We got the most out of being in the studio and the possibilities that opened up for us, but we do pride ourselves on being a live band. That's mainly what we do - perform live - so we wanted to capture that and the energy and spontaneity of it all."

Solise, Carman and company say the live album will function as though it were a studio album - that is, it's composed of entirely new material to better reflect their current state as a band. "We've actually gone back into a deeper catalog of some of our very first songs that Dylan and I had started writing but never released, and we've brought those back to the band," Carman says. "Those songs have changed considerably since Dylan and I first came up with them as a duo. Plus, we're always writing new songs and nowadays we've been playing some old-time and traditional songs at our live shows. Our music's always changing and evolving and hopefully growing."

<http://www.myspace.com/thecorduroyroad>

Photographer: Philip Wages

