

IthacaTimes

FALL ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

Miracle

The story behind Ithaca's happiest band | pg. 15

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Do You Believe In Miracles?

HOW FATE PULLED THE AREA'S HAPPIEST BAND TOGETHER

By Nick Reynolds

PHOTO: DAVID MCKINLEY

Even in a place as talent-rich as Ithaca, New York, the band Stone Cold Miracle really does seem like something of a miracle in the local music scene.

In their three years together, they've accomplished the types of things most regionally focused acts wouldn't: well-received mainstage sets at Ithaca Fest and Grassroots? Check. An appearance at Bernie Milton Pavilion for the CFCU Downtown Concert series? Check. A timeslot onstage in a festival featuring major acts like the X Ambassadors and The Roots?

Well, we're almost there: the inaugural Cayuga Sound Festival, the much-anticipated, waterfront-dominating affair in which the band has been invited to play, is still a few days off.

"That kind of dropped from out of the sky," said guitarist Dustin Stuhr, relaxing at a picnic table before a race day gig on the waterfront in Watkins Glen last month. "...we're trying to work it so The Roots stay at my house."

Cayuga Sound stands to be a fitting end to a summer that has been particularly kind to the band. Now something of a regional force, the group has found its groove and a loyal following and, after several months of work, are set to release their newest album (still without a name) to serve as the first recorded document of a band that these past months, has truly solidified what they're all about. Since forming in 2014, the band has become a bona fide regional force, the modern soul group becoming a regular name on any festival worth its salt and a

popular weekend draw for the happy hour crowd.

"This band's been on a clear trajectory from the beginning," Stuhr said. "We've had a really good response from our first gig... a fire's been built. This summer, it's like the vision is getting realized, the word is getting out there and people are starting to show up. In three years, nothing has declined or leveled off which is totally exciting."

They should've expected something to happen: the group's origin story feels like fate had a little something to do with it.

Before the birth of Stone Cold Miracle, Stuhr and fellow guitarist Nick LaVerne were part of a similar group called The

"This band's been on a clear trajectory from the beginning. We've had a really good response from our first gig... a fire's been built."

Habits, an Amy Winehouse/Alabama Shakes-inspired R&B outfit seamlessly mixing biting, smoky vocals with spirited guitarwork and an ironclad rhythm section. The group was solid, gaining itself a bit of a reputation in the local club circuit but – like most things in life – it came to an end. Not ones to quit on a good thing, Stuhr and LaVerne – still attached to the sound they'd created – wanted to carry on the group's soul anew and held onto the idea while, in the meantime, began the pursuit of new prospects: particularly, a power pop band. They went to Craigslist and, in one of those

rare Craigslist success stories, found bassist Andy Adelewitz, looking for his first live group after a five year break from the stage.

"I was looking to do more of a Weezer kind of thing," he said. "They were more into Ryan Adams... we traded emails for a few months and thought, 'hey, we might be able to make something work.'"

Things changed once Stuhr and LaVerne brought Ian Cummings into the fold. A seasoned drummer who had previously subbed in on a couple of gigs for the Habits, Cummings came to the pair with word of a talented soul singer he'd met at a religious youth convention worth auditioning.

Trece Stevenson has seen almost every stage a performer can see, from gracing a European stage with renowned gospel singer David Bratton to building her own following in her hometown of Erie, Pennsylvania: playing gigs anywhere from wedding halls to prison auditoriums.

"Whatever it calls for," she said. "Just as long as the music and the message behind it gets out there. That's what's important to me."

Everyone was skeptical. Just finished with a powerhouse vocalist in The Habits' Elly Holiday, Stuhr and LaVerne both had their doubts and Stevenson, two years out of her last band, wasn't sure she was ready to be attached to another group just yet.

"I wanted the right vibe," she said. "I wanted people who love what they do."

The skepticism dissipated almost immediately.

"She opened her mouth and sang for about 30 seconds," Stuhr said. "And we were all just floored: 'please join this band!' The tables just flipped immediately; instead of her selling herself to us, we were selling ourselves on her."

They played their first show within the first two weeks of coming together as a group, Stuhr getting a call from a friend at a venue who needed a fill-in for a band that had cancelled.

"And Nick said, 'that would be a Stone Cold Miracle if we could pull that off,'" Stuhr said. "And that's how we got the name."

They started small but, despite their size, began to build a burgeoning reputation going into 2015. Cummings eventually moved down to Brooklyn two years ago and in came Zaun Marshburn, a seasoned regular of the local scene and fan of the band, who stuck around after filling in one night for a gig at the Silver Line Tap Room in Trumansburg. Though he'd never played with the group before, he "absolutely crushed it."

"And then we were begging him to join the band," LaVerne said.

Live, their sound is tight, a fact that's surprising given that, their daily lives as full as they are, they rarely – if ever – rehearse, the band one that has truly embraced the possibilities of the digital age by rehearsing and writing songs via email and mp3 files. This may be one factor that plays into their



STEVENSON AND LAVERNE, IN WATKINS GLEN.
PHOTO: NICK REYNOLDS

clear-cut chemistry onstage, the loose and grinning personas they portray onstage: their joy is genuine, the fact they're together for a gig more a reunion than just another weekend at work.

"Having done this for many years, for me it's about the relationship between people – a shared worldview or vision of what we're trying to do," said Stevenson. "If the people in the band really care about each other, it really comes across in the music and it makes it that much more powerful. We're trying to lift people up and inspire them, so it's way easier when everyone in the band loves each other."

"When we get onstage, that is our 'Trece and the whole band want to instill hope, magic, good feelings in everyone standing in front of us through connection, relationship, and love... It wasn't something we set out to do at first but when it started happening, we realized we were on to something. So much so that it influences the songwriting, the choice of cover songs, the things Trece says between songs, and the marketing of the band. We want to make people feel good."

—DUSTIN STUHR

connection time," LaVerne pipes in. "Actively listening to each other and occasionally going down the rabbit hole sometimes."

"It allows you to actually get in the moment," adds Stevenson. "So you're not scripted – you see people's reaction."

Now veritable veterans of the local circuit, they've found themselves in the feelgood branch of the market: their shows coming oftentimes at wineries, breweries and the big festive gatherings, like outdoor markets and larger festivals. With local success in hand and armed with a new album, the group has been looking to branch out, looking at Rochester, Buffalo, New York City as their route to taking the next step.

"We've never been more than 30 or 40 minutes outside of Ithaca," Adelwitz said.

"We haven't needed to," LaVerne said. "There's so much opportunity right here.

But we want to get to bigger venues... eventually."

They think they have the potential to get there.

Going to their shows, one can also sense a huge social aspect to the group, not just in their music but in their message: the band may be the right band for its time, a needed elixir to a time fraught with anxiety and despair: an infusion of positivity in an era where people are simply looking for a good time and above all, the promise of something better.

"From the first show, we have been told over and over by listeners that they felt 'moved' 'energized' 'uplifted' etc. by

our music," Stuhr wrote in an email several weeks ago. "We always smile at this because we feel the same way. Trece has a way of pulling people in and making them a part of the music, making them feel connected to the band and to each other [...] It is a political act in the sense that we are bringing positivity to people's lives in a time when people are stressed by events, circumstances, and politics that are negative by nature."

Stevenson especially has a way of connecting with the audience; She smiles, talks, engages the crowd throughout the show in a way that makes them feel good and makes them feel connected to the band and the music. Enough so that as every show closes, she ends up meeting with fans and talking to them, "pouring their hearts out" over the impact the music had on them.

"And I don't mind," she laughs.

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