

Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

2007-12-19

Section: EYE

Edition: THREE

Page: 28Z

THESE ACTS COULD GO BIG
COURTNEY DEVORES, NEWS@EYECARLOTTE.COM

Whether your style leans toward foot-stompin' country-rock, finger-snapping jazz or heavier head-nodding hooks, these Carolina artists get our vote for Most Likely to Succeed Beyond the Regional Club Scene.

With a combination of songwriting and impressive live shows that only get better with each gig, we say catch 'em while you can locally.

The Lights, Fluorescent

Members: Erika Blatnik (vocals), Zach Irvin (drums), Robby Hartis (bass/vocals), Craig Friday (guitar/vocals), Andre Francois (guitar).

Homebase: Charlotte

Longevity: Less than a year, although members are veterans of area bands such as Via, Shortround and Frontpage.

Sound: Powerful female vocals, layered, often heavy, guitar melodies, and hooks. When Blatnik and Hartis share vocals, the vibe is reminiscent of emo-rock trio Rainer Maria.

Strengths: Originality and Blatnik's distinct vocals amid shifting tempos and moods. "It's a cool contrast having a more energetic band with her vocals," says Irvin. There's a camaraderie that seems to result from their songwriting. Adds Hartis, "Andre and Craig will bring a riff to the table and she'll sit down with her journal and write. She starts yelling stuff that fits so well with the emotion of the music."

Influences: Me Without You, The Beatles, Johnny Cash, Cursive and Bob Dylan.

Accolades and Adventures: Opened for Secret Lives of Free Masons.

Next Up: Debut EP, "Neoteny," due in January.

Listen For: "Mr. Pretender," "Bluejay" and "Telephone Booth."

More: [myspace.com/thelightsfluorescent](#)

S.O. Stereo

Homebase: Charlotte

Members: Bradley C. Davis (vocals), Jimmy James (drums), John C. Phillips Jr. (guitar), Brandon Furr (bass).

Together: A year and half.

Sound: Clever, conversational lyrics and an edgy mix of Coldplay and Dave Matthews with elements of spoken word, trip-hop, folk-rock and hip-hop.

Strengths: Memorable songs; charisma; Davis' ability to shift from slam poet lyricist to heartfelt crooner, and James' inventive drumming. Few songs sound alike on the limited run debut album, "The Brighter Light of August," but Davis' voice is the defining thread. Their more eclectic rock side comes across even more live.

Influences: Coldplay, U2.

Accolades and Adventures: Signed to Spektral Music Group, an Atlanta production company run by Teddy Riley (Guy, Blackstreet), best known for his role in the influential New Jack Swing movement. The group also received praise and advice from Charlotte-raised soul singer Anthony Hamilton and producer Bruce Irvine.

Next Up: Back into the studio and touring the college circuit.

Listen For: "Gunslinger," "Mrs. Gray" and "Disco Blues."

More: sostereo.com; myspace.com/saveourstereo

South85

Members: Tracy Wyatt (vocals), Kathy Osborne (guitar, mandolin, vocals), Mike Bader (guitar, mandolin, banjo, dobro), Ashley Conine (harmonica, guitar, mandolin)

Homebase: Clover and Cowpens.

Sound: Southern country-rock with Wyatt as a modern day Loretta Lynn-meets-Gretchen Wilson.

Longevity: 2+ years.

Strengths: Attitude, harmonies, Osborne's songwriting and Wyatt's voice and presence. They also speak to the women in the crowd. "We grew up in, and will hopefully be a part, of a male-dominated industry. To be two women fronting a band and Kathy writing the originals is amazing to me. We want the women in the audience to feel as important as we do on stage." Adds Osborne, "I really try to give a unique female perspective in my songs."

Influences: Southern rock from Marshall Tucker Band to Black Crowes and songwriters such as Gillian Welch.

Accolades: The group received "Most Promising Artist" and Wyatt received "Best Female Vocalist" at the first Charlotte Music Awards in September.

Next Up: Debut album, "El Camino," should be out this spring. Also solidifying their rhythm section.

Listen For: "El Camino" "Sex and Laundry" and "DUI."

More: south85.com

Kellin Watson

Homebase: Asheville

Longevity: Began playing at 13; recording at 16. The studio time was a Christmas gift from her parents.

Sound: Jazzy soul and swinging pop comparable to Fiona Apple or a less folksy Ani DiFranco.

Strengths: The 26-year-old has an endearing stage demeanor and a killer voice, not to mention soulful songs that don't fit in any particular box.

Influences: "There's always been this underlying jazzy influence," says Watson. "I got that from my grandfather, who was a jazz guitar player. When I would go to the beach,

we'd listen to these jazz songs. At the time I hated it, but when I became older it just subconsciously influenced me."

Accolades and Adventures: Watson caught the ear of Smashing Pumpkins' Billy Corgan while he was staying at The Biltmore where she regularly gigged last summer. "He put me in touch with his management," she says. She also placed second in "Big Break," a CMT reality series, and opened for Amos Lee at the Neighborhood Theatre.

Next Up: Promoting her new album, "No Static," playing New York and seeing what comes of the Corgan connection.

Listen For: "Paper Bird," "Steeple Tops" and "My Ship."

More: kellinwatson.com.

You Tell Us

What bands or performers - who are local or often play here - do you think we should check out?

Send info to feedback@eyecharlotte.com. Please include "check it out" in subject field.

1. MARK S. BOLES. Upcoming shows Friday, Dec. 21, at Lunchbox Records; Friday, Dec. 28, at Evening Muse.; 2. LUKE BUMGARNER. Upcoming Show Friday, Dec. 21, at Evening Muse in NoDa.; 3. SARA BADER. Upcoming Show Jan. 19 at Puckett's Farm Equipment.; 4. SANDLIN GAITHER PHOTOGRAPHY. Upcoming Show Look for her at Neighborhood Theatre in '08.; 5. Wilson; 6. Lynn