

RETRO VEGAS STYLINGS: THE MOONSHINERS [CES]

*Lead Singer Speaks On Live Experience, Nostalgia & Re-Invention Of
Songs and The Las Vegas Musicians Community*



With advent of all aspects retro, the notion of The Jazz Era and Prohibition-style speakeasies as well as music oriented mash-ups have become all the rage. Nowhere could this really thrive but in a town like Las Vegas but even more so at the local level. At the opening of The Space just a stone's throw from The Palms & Rio, local acts and the musician community foster a sense of belonging. The Moonshiners, led by singer Savannah Smith, played its opening with gusto as the Consumer Electronics Show continued across town. Smith sat down with The Buzz to discuss inspiration, nostalgia and connection.

The Buzz: Can you talk about where the group found this vibe with these kind of songs and this kind of playing?

Savannah Smith: There's two sides to that. The band itself is made up of some really, really close friends, which helps a lot. The band kind of evolved naturally. The gig actually came before the group. There was a gig at The Palms a few years back. One of my friends was promoted there. She called and said, "Hey, we're doing a speakeasy night. Do you have a band maybe you could put together just to play some tunes and create some ambiance?" I said, "Sure." So I get together a few of my friends and we put it together. That's where the idea came from. It was kind of taking

newer songs, so at least people knew them. But kind of them throwing them back and having an upright bass, and a piano, and maybe a horn or two. Just to kind of give them a feel that it would be music that they were familiar with. But I think the electricity of all of that really comes from that we really listen to each other well, we play together well, and we enjoy doing it. We play songs that we like. It's a joy to kind of come up with new arrangements, come up with movements within those pieces, make them different, and discover new things.

The Buzz: Now, when you first went into that gig at The Palms, did you know what you were going to play or have an idea about how the arrangement would go?

SS: Yeah, we had a few. I actually created it with another keyboard player in town named Kenny Davidson, a great keyboard player, a huge advocate for musicians out here. He's a very good arranger in coming up with new ideas and new ways to play the stuff. We'd done a few gigs together. We worked together at a bar downtown called "Don't Tell Momma's", where all the bartenders were singing bartenders. There's a piano player out there the whole night. They actually have one that's very famous in New York...same owners. They have one here now, and we met there. We basically took a lot of the stuff that we had played over the years or songs that we liked, or anything that I had ever done at any of Kenny's Cabarets. We just kind of took them, and threw them back...gave them this 20s, 30s, 40s swing feel. It ended up being a lot more fun than I even realized it would be, or could even have comprehended that it would be. It took on a whole life of its own. Like I said, the chicken came before the egg or vice versa. But the gig definitely came before the band. It kind of gave us our start and opened up a lot of doors for us to create a thing that's kind of cool and different in this city. It's nice to be in one of those entertainment capitals that kind of fosters that kind of the process.

The Buzz: Now the whole prohibition sort of retro thing where you do anything from Guns N' Roses to India Arie to Lorde. But you have to take it and make it that style. But A. You have to have the vocal range. B. You sort of have to play into the idea of what the song is. Can you talk about that? It's almost a form of acting within it.

SS: I'm actually glad you said that. And this is not to put denial on it in any means. My Masters degree is actually in performance...in acting and directing. And I got it here. UNLV. I went here and I loved it. But I didn't really sing much during that time either. This has been the first project that I've really worked on in approximately the five years that I've been here that's mine...where I've gotten to employ those skills and really use what I learned there. She's definitely -- the character (China) [that I play] is definitely a character. But there's a lot of me in there too. She's definitely her own kind of character. She marches to her own drum there. She's -- I think everyone in the

band kind of plays a part which I love. What I like is that I love the image and the theatrical side of it. We do like to look at it as almost vaudevillian act. We play off of each other. We goof around. It's not just about the music the music is the icing on top, and it just so happens to be that the music has good musicians up there doing it as well. But you got to play the part to play up the songs. You play the story up because that's the fun of it. You not just up there singing the words because that actually means something. You kind of create something within the style.



The Buzz: Does the style play differently in certain venues and certain ideas as far as how you interact with the audience, or how the space sort of defies you?

SS: It really depends on the night. We have the nights where people kind of expect us...we will do a little more of a dinner set. So it's maybe more of our more low-key stuff. It just depends on what the client wants. If we're out at Caesars Palace playing at the bar during anything like that, it tends to be kind of a free-for-all party time (*laughing*). We kind of amp everything up and there is a lot of call and response from the audience. I would say above all that's probably our favorite thing to do because it is a very interactive group. The more that we get from the audience, the better the performance is. The truth is that this is not a sit in your chair and watch kind of band. We want it to be that "get up on your feet" hackle and have a good time. Let us play off of you. They are just as much a part of this. It's not just a concert. It's not just a gig. We try to make it an experience...something that everyone can kind of be a part of.

The Buzz: But you as the character also hold yourself in a certain way even with the oral and physical cues, like doing the Charleston.

SS: Absolutely. That has come, and I think not only from training, but also from the many, many different types of shows that I have been honored [to be in]. I'm fortunate enough to be in out here in Vegas. They because they have ranged from, like I said, being a singing bar attendant, where you have to sing anything and everything someone requests to being a zombie at Zombie Burlesque being in a ball gown and dancing in 1940s ballroom style. I used to put that down [that I was a] jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none. I felt like I didn't have my own voice because I was playing all these other people. But it really has served me well in this project range-wise, I think, vocally and acting-wise in being able to express and emote songs differently and really change from one to the other with [ease]. And it's still evolving every single day. Anytime we get into the studio and rehearse, we find new harmonies, new ways to express this chord, or a new break here. It's such a collaborative, wonderful process and a lot of these people have worked in the rooms not just as musicians, but in different roles in the theater and have and still do. So to have all these facets and all of those points-of-view when you're in a room together working on this project, which is already fun in and of itself, just makes the possibilities [greater]. We have a lot of tools in our toolkit.

The Buzz: We were talking about how you have to connect with the stories? Are there specific songs that you can talk about that really sort of get you?

SS: One in a particular, and it's an audience participation song. We have a mash-up of "Minnie The Moocher" and "Seven Nation Army" (by The White Stripes). And the way that we always at that song in particular, is that we can almost paint the picture of the music video it would be. It starts out with one of the guys doing the solo at the top and then singing about Minnie The Moocher. And I'm basically supposed to be, even on stage, Minnie the Moocher. So I start out that way, and it's very narrative. You talk about me, and I do a little move, or a little dance, or have a little interaction with him, as Minnie The Moocher. And then I immediately take on the role of her when "Seven Nation Army" kicks in. So it's this whole idea that he's-- it's almost like he could be sitting in the audience talking about her, and then all of a sudden, you see the spotlight comes up. You know what I mean? You can almost visualize this narrative in this almost cinematic way that this song plays out...and the entire audience is involved, too. That's one of the most experiential songs that I think that we have that's fun, that everybody knows, and that everybody can be involved in, yet it still has this sort of twist and a little story to play out.



The Buzz: Which song's the most challenging to sing?

SS: Oh, my goodness. There's a few. The ones that have been the most challenging are of course the really, really up-tempo ones. So anything from-- we have one called "Crazy Bodee", that's a mash-up of a lot of the songs that have the word "crazy" in it (*laughing*) and it's super, super fast. "Roar" is very fast. "Toxic", the Britany Spears song. "Welcome To The Jungle" is a very long song, too. That involves a lot of stamina. And then there's a duet in the middle. There's all sorts of stuff that goes on in some of these, but they just tend to be a little taxing because I'm trying -- You have frenetic energy of wanting to move, but also having to maintain breath control and engage the audience and engage your bandmates. You just try to keep breathing basically and make it through some of them, but those technically are the difficult ones for sure.

The Buzz: So is this purely a live band or is there a studio component to its idea?

SS: It's interesting. We actually recorded the start of our album. It was EP. It was in the studio and it was good. We liked it. But I really do think that the live access of this band is kind of what makes it. I really, really do. When I say it's an experience, it's not that you can't get an MP3. What we're planning on doing now instead of releasing that EP is actually to actually to go back to The Space funny enough - and take a live recording and have a really good sound engineer at the board. So that is a live recorded EP of The Moonshiners that people can have -- then at least you get the idea of the shared energy in that space. You can hear and feel what's actually happening in the room. I feel like you lose a little bit of that in the studio only because it is such an experiential height of performance.

The Buzz: Are you surprised by how much people react to it? I've seen different bands try to do what you guys do, but you hit it right on the head. That's the reason I was right up there.

SS: Well I think that the nostalgia, no matter what anybody says, everybody loves and everybody romanticizes. They romanticize that era. Even though it was World War II -- you want to go 20s, 30s, 40s, World War II, Great Depression, Prohibition era, any of that. No matter what movies, all of your fashion, any of that kind-- it will always revert back to those beautiful, beautiful costumes, the beautiful idea of this jazz kind of era, this smoky underground room. Even if it wasn't as pretty as we like to make it out to be, we will always romanticize it and we love the idea of what that looks like and what that sounds like, I really do think so. We're still coming-- I mean "Cafe Society" (from Woody Allen). It was all based in the 1930s and Hollywood and this kind of beautiful idealized golden era. I think there's something to be said for the fact that people do like that. We wanted to make it accessible by doing songs that they know because as much as people love jazz music, as much as people love that sound, I do believe that people need something that's topical. People need something that they know in order to stay engaged. Not to get engaged (*smiling*). But I think that in order to maintain their attention and in order to keep them engaged you really have to have something that they know...that they can gravitate to. And I think it's kind of a game too. I've had people say that...that they realize that they know this song from the verse but it's not until that chorus kicks in that they realize what the song is. So it's almost like this fun game of trivia, figuring out, "Oh what song is this? I know this song! What is it? What is it? I know it!" And it's cool to kind of see that. It not only engages that musical sense but I really think it kind of intellectually engages a lot of people. And it's a lot of fun. And it's cool to look at. It not only takes you back but keeps you very present which is hard to do, you know?



The Buzz: Looking at the journey of you getting to where you are with this band, but also how Vegas has been such a part of it. I think, in many ways, it reflects the importance of all these underground communities in Vegas...that of musicians and comedians and all this stuff which most people don't hear about. But also you went to UNLV. You came out. And you worked through this element as well.

SS: And I love that you brought that up and that that's your last question. It's a great way to end it. I had someone interview me last year and asked me, "Could this band have formed anywhere but Vegas?" And I don't believe it could have. I do not believe it could have been formed anywhere else. I don't believe that it would have the depth. I don't believe that it would have all of the different-- I just don't believe it would have all of that. I don't believe it would have all of the colors that we paint with and all of the different tools in our toolbox. We all come from such broad, big backgrounds, and not only playing music but doing so many other things --- acting, sound design, different instruments. And then you do...you have the support of the community. And there's also so many beautiful things that no one gets to see that are underground on the Strip...a lot of comedians you mentioned. And we try to draw from that a little bit, that improvisation, that ability to play up there on stage. That is definitely present in this project. And we love to watch those people flourish and thrive. It's fun to be in a community that is an advocate for you, especially I'm sure being in place like The Space you probably notice. But there's so much support, and love, and graciousness, and gratitude, and all sorts of just really, really heartfelt support, not the fake stuff, but the good stuff that is out there in Vegas. And I don't think that we would have had all the opportunities that we would have had. The band wouldn't have even formed if it wasn't for a friend that I had known, just as a friend,

not because she ever hired me for anything, but just because I like hanging out with her and she liked hanging out with me. She called me up one day and said, "Hey, could you do this for me? I think this would be a fun project for you." So there really is a sense of lifting one another up and just helping each other foster our strengths and really thrive and be successful here in this city. And I just don't think that this band could have formed anywhere else but here.

Tim Wassberg

A graduate of New York University's Tisch School Of The Arts with degrees in Film/TV Production & Film Criticism, Tim has written for magazines such as Moviemaker, Moving Pictures, Conde Nast Traveler UK and Casino Player. He enjoys traveling and distinct craft beers among other things.



Make Sure To Check Out:

[The Moonshiners](#), which performs modern songs done in the style of the Prohibition Era. They like to call it "prohibition pop" and it'll knock your socks off.