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A Hat Trick: Phoenix's Sugar Thieves drop three albums mid-pandemic

BY KRISTINE CANNON ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2020

MUSIC

Four years and four studios later, Phoenix's Sugar Thieves have released three new albums—and in the midst of a pandemic, no less.

Since 2006, the Sugar Thieves have injected Arizona's music scene with a healthy dose of American roots music.

And this summer, they released two different yet complementing albums, titled "Dreamin'" and "Anytown USA," as well as a vinyl record, "Driftin' Away," which includes songs from both LPs along with an unreleased single.

"It feels fantastic," vocalist Meridith Moore says. "It has been a long time coming. We've been working on those albums for years."

"Dreamin'" is a 10-track album that takes listeners on an electric ride, one that boasts a touch of gospel with hits of gritty rock 'n' roll.

"Anytown USA," on the other hand, reflects a softer, more country-folk acoustic side of the band.

"We've had a lot of really, really positive feedback," Moore says.

"There's a little something for everybody there to fit your mood," the vocalist continues. "If you're feeling front porch-picking kind of acoustic stuff, then we have that to offer. And if you're wanting to reminisce about Rhythm Room days, then we have that, too."

Title track "Dreamin'" may be a favorite among fans, but Moore's favorite?

"I love the song 'Fat and Happy,'" she says, explaining that, as an Arizona transplant from the Midwest, the song resonates with her on "a lot of different levels."

"The lyrics are beautiful," she says. "It truly takes you to the place where Mikel's (guitarist Mikel Lander) writing about: this family, multigenerations of working-class people, punch in the time clock every day. Mom got cancer and passed away, but they still punch on. They still get up every morning at the crack of dawn go to work."

It's a song, she says, many essential workers may relate to.

"A lot of the essential workers are now not just punching a time clock and not making a lot of money to support their family, but (they are) also risking their lives and their health to go to work. That really resonates with me in this current climate, too, with this pandemic happening," Moore explains.

Listen closely to the lyrics on all three albums, and you'll hear stories that address everything from opioid addiction and environmental issues to the aforementioned plight of working-class factory workers in small-town America.

And they're all told through Moore and Lander's very different songwriting approaches. The two are husband and wife.

"(Lander) is a very much a storyteller," Moore says. "He really takes you to those places with his lyrics."

Moore, on the other hand, describes her approach as more internal, capturing feeling over imagery.

"I'm not necessarily painting the picture of a family or a Midwest farmer or a place necessarily, but you go within. Like with drifting away or dreaming, it takes you inside of yourself and gives you a feeling you can bring into your own mind and your own heart," Moore explains.

As a whole, these new albums are the band's most diverse and eclectic body of work yet—which just so happens to be a reflection of the band's fanbase.

"They represent two aspects of the band. We have this country-folk acoustic side, and we also have a swingin' electric, big-band thing. So, we thought, 'Let's give them both,'" Moore says.

The duo is rounded out with multi-instrumentalist Shea Marshall, Todd Chuba on drums, and newest member Michael King on bass.

"They have all of these fantastic ideas about how to really form the song, grow the song," Moore says of the band members. "It's amazing because a lot of times, Michael and I will write a tune and be performing it live as a duo, but after a year of performing it live with the band, it changes and becomes a completely different tune."

The Sugar Thieves recorded the new albums in bits and pieces over the past four years across four different studios: Blue Door with Noah Guttell in Phoenix, where they recorded many "Anytown USA" tracks; Mesa Community College with Andy Seagle; Tempest Recording with Clark Rigsby in Tempe for one track; and—their last stop—Mia Studio with Otto D'Agnolo in Scottsdale.

It was here at Mia Studio, a small studio space in Scottsdale, that D'Agnolo put the finishing touches on all 21 songs and mastered the albums.

"I love that they included recordings from over the years and all around town, putting them all together in this double release. It takes a lot of work," D'Agnolo adds.

"The design concept was as unique as their songs and their style, (and) I think they should be very proud of both of these records."

Mia Studio is D'Agnolo's personal project studio, built primarily for trios, overdubs and video post-production.

And while he knew, at some point, he'd take on a client who would need more space, D'Agnolo never imagined that the first record he'd cut in the new studio would be the Sugar Thieves: a band that wanted to track everyone all at once.

"Normally, I might have just taken the project to another studio, but it was Mikel and Meridith and Todd and Shea and Mike. So, you do what you have to do," D'Agnolo says.

That included placing a Leslie speaker cabinet in the shower and transforming the kitchen into an isolation booth for the upright bass.

"I had already installed a window between the kitchen and control room, so it worked out wonderfully," D'Agnolo says.

While it may have been a tight fit for the six-piece band and their nearly dozen instruments, D'Agnolo made it work.

"He's such a great guy to work with," Moore says.

"The thing about the Sugar Thieves' recordings is that we're not a group that goes in and isolates everything," she continues. "We want to be in the studio at the same time.

"We want to make eye contact with one another. We want to feel each other, feel each other's energy while we're recording."

This approach to recording assures listeners that what you hear on the album is what you'll get—live.

"We've traveled to Europe and Mexico and all over the United States. We have a lot of fans that can't come to the Rhythm Room and see us or can't come to a great local venue here in Arizona to enjoy the band live. So, when we put out an album, we want to give them a taste of that live experience," Moore says.

That said, it comes as no surprise that the band sorely misses performing live for their fans.

But, Moore admits, they don't see themselves returning to an indoor stage anytime soon.

"The idea of packing 300 people into a crowded Rhythm Room on a hot summer night—I don't see that happening for many years," Moore says.

While Moore does not feel comfortable performing at restaurants, bars or clubs anytime soon—"I don't want to sway anybody from going out to support live music, but my dad is vulnerable," she explains.

"Absolutely," she says. "I think modifications will have to be made so that everybody stays safe and healthy, but absolutely. I think about the musicians, gig workers, the venue owners—we're in the same boat. We're all in this together."

The Rhythm Room, in particular, is a venue that Moore calls the Sugar Thieves' "home away from home."

"We've had a long-standing residency there," she says. "Prior to COVID, we performed there once a month for many, many years."

And every month, they pack the venue with moving, grooving, shaking bodies.

"We're not going to stop writing and being creative, and we're also not going to stop reaching out to our audience. We will be back, and when this pandemic is under control, hopefully there's a vaccine by the end of the year, numbers can get stabilized, and we can come back and we'll take 'em to church," Moore says.

Sugar Thieves, [sugarthieves.bandcamp.com](#).

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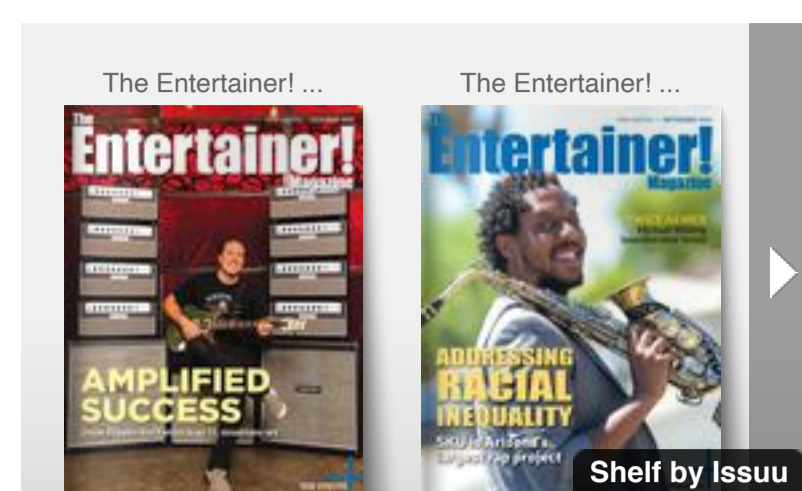
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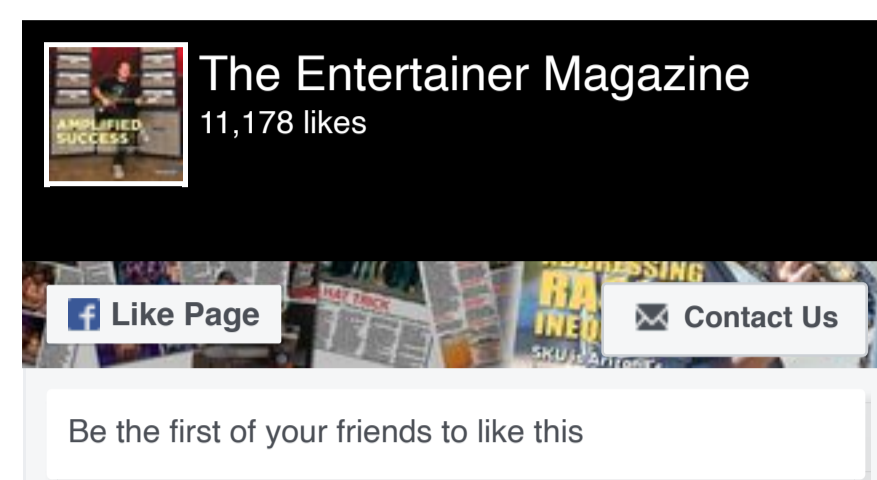
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