

Grace Potter rocks and rolls along

By Paul Crocetti, Boston.com Correspondent | August 4, 2006

Vermont's Grace Potter, and her band, the Nocturnals, are almost always on tour. And why not, when live shows are a big reason for their following? Potter and the Nocturnals are in the middle of a months-long summer stretch that sees them play the Lowell Summer Music Series Saturday night. They also recently re-released their second album, 'Nothing but the Water,' on Hollywood Records. Potter took some time out of her busy tour schedule to speak with Boston.com, from a tour stop in Portland, Maine.

How has the tour been going?

"Things have been really busy. Sometimes you wake up and you don't know where you are. Sometimes it's nice to not know where you are. Every day we wake up with some new mission. But when we get to a new city now, we're starting to see some progress. People are starting to be there."

Last week, the band played a free show in Copley Square to hundreds of people, but faced some very windy weather. How do you fight through obstacles like that?

"You have to be professional no matter what happens. Anything that goes wrong is only amplified when you're onstage. You gotta roll with it. You gotta be in the mood to handle it. Just hold it together and play it cool."

You wrote a song ("Stop the Bus") about your old tour bus. Does the band still use it?

"That RV died right as I was writing that song. I wrote the tune in Denver and it died there, and it's still there. That was a real tour bus. I painted the whole inside of it. I painted black and white checkers on the floor. It was like a '70s Scooby machine. It was like, the coolest thing ever. We were bummed when it died. Our new one is a little more commercially appropriate. We're a little more professional now."

Do you have a favorite act you've been on a bill with?

"We just played with Buddy Guy up in Buffalo, and he's unbelievable. He's 70 [expletive] years old. He's just wild. I was watching every move he made. He hits me really hard."

What are your favorite places to play?

"Boston is great. It's close to home, so we can go see our families. Philadelphia's been great. Red Rocks was great. We played there recently with Big Head Todd and the Monsters. It's such a weird place to play, where nature takes over."

"There are a lot of cool venues, man. Austin, Texas – we were there during South by Southwest two years ago, and we were in a section called 'Not South by Southwest' (which is not actually part of the festival) at the time. It was for independent, unsigned bands, and we were not on a label at the time. Then ironically, the next year, we were signed with a label owned by Disney."

How is the new record label?

"It still feels like we're an independent band. It's awesome. I never thought I'd say that."

"We will have trouble. Trouble will find us. It's definitely been challenging. We've had creative decisions, creative questions. But I mean, even Bono has questions from time to time. And that's cool. It's really empowering to have a group of people behind you."

Will you have a new album soon?

"We're hoping to get into the studio in October, November and December. Our goal is to finish the record by the new year. But post-production will go until March, probably."

"It's basically been two years – we've been waiting to get back into the studio. We have 30-35 new tunes, and we'll whittle that down to 10 to 13."

"Chris Martin from Coldplay, when they were making their third album, said, 'It has to be sh-t hot.' (laughs) This is our third album. It has to be unbelievable. We're really taking it seriously. I mean, with the first two albums, I think we did the job. Now I want to make a record that kills the job."

How have the new songs been going?

"What I love about the record label is that they don't tell us what to play live. They don't say, 'You have to play seven songs from this record.' A lot of bands have to play certain songs. I hope not to ever have to play some sappy love song. I guess I just won't write a sappy love song."

"We have been playing mostly new stuff [live]. Being on tour is a great time to test out new material. We're a new band to lots of people anyway. So anything we play is going to appear new."

"I hope we didn't lose anyone with the new stuff. 'Stop the Bus' is an example of a song that has changed over time, and evolved live. I'm glad people have responded to it. I love the song."

How has your sound developed?

"There's definitely a different sound. Our influences have changed. Our sound has changed. That happens when you play live a lot. If you listen to the first U2 album, the first Pearl Jam album, they sound different. Every word you're singing now is hitting miles, as opposed to feet."

"Our songwriting is changing. I think I'm starting to come into my own as a songwriter."

Who are your influences now?

"Led Zeppelin is a heavy influence now. The Stones, The Who. We're rocking more now, getting wilder at our shows. I really love newer bands like Wilco, My Morning Jacket. Radiohead – where they go with the music is like watching a symphony play."

Was taking your sound to different levels something you originally set out to do?

"It just happened that way. First, I never thought that I would be in a rock band. When I was starting out, I always thought I'd be a folk singer. The music just changes naturally. I can't explain how it happened."

"You always want to appeal to certain groups of people. We've continually challenged ourselves. Last year, I picked up a guitar for the first time. The year before, I picked up the Hammond B-3 organ. I had just been playing piano. If you challenge yourself, people will respond."

"The arc of the music can go from mellow to a wild Who moment where Matt (Burr) is slamming on his drums. But it's totally unintentional. That's the best way to keep it."

Grace Potter and the Nocturnals play Boarding House Park in Lowell this Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$15.

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