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Full of Grace

Grace Potter and the Nocturnals poised to be Vermont's next big musical export
By Brent Hallenbeck | Free Press Staff Writer

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As Grace Potter and the Nocturnals ended their sound check Tuesday night, the sound man at Nectar's told Potter her vocals were a little low in the mix.

"It's called restraint," the singer told him, laughing, "something I just learned." Vocal restraint is not something Potter's growing group of fans expects, as the young Waitsfield singer's unleashed, bluesy, soulful voice has been turning heads in Vermont and throughout New England for the past couple of years. Almost everything about her style, from her confident air on stage to the way her fingers pounce upon the keys of her Hammond B-3 organ, says Potter holds nothing back.

She and her three band mates are showing restraint in at least one way, though: their careers. If the Vermont music scene has a star-in-waiting, it's Grace Potter. Yet she and her band are deftly stepping aside from major record-label offers, waiting for all suitors to court them until they decide which deal they like. They don't even know for sure if they'll sign with a big label because they want to hold their music above their dreams of reaching a much larger audience.

"It's a hard thing to say flat-out because we have a little air of indie snob," Potter said as she and the Nocturnals dined on salads at Nectar's, the Burlington nightspot where the band is performing a monthlong residency every Tuesday through January. "The key right now is that we find a label we feel really connected to. We're patient. We'd rather have the big-lasting career as musicians than 'flash in the pan.'

"We want to be doing this until we're 50."

Blown away

It'll be awhile before Potter and the Nocturnals, all in their 20s, hit the half-century mark. Considering the earthy, knowing way Potter sings of jilted love and jealousy, it's hard to believe she's only 21. The band's sound echoes music that's older than the band members themselves; they're influenced by musicians that came of age in the 1960s and '70s, from the Rolling Stones to J.J. Cale, The Band to Bonnie Raitt, Otis Redding to Little Feat, Dire Straits to Talking Heads.

Potter's mother tells her she began singing commercial jingles before she began talking. Potter said she comes from a family of hummers; she also comes from a family of Mad River Valley artisans -- her mother, Peggy, makes hand-painted bowls, and her father, Sparky, is a sign maker and graphic designer. Potter writes the band's songs, and her sound grew in large part from her parents' record collection.

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Potter attended her parents' alma mater, St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. She was a first-year student in 2002 when senior Matt Burr heard her sing at an open-mike night on campus. The drummer asked if she wanted to join a band. Soon they began playing in a trio with bassist Courtright Beard, like Potter a graduate of Harwood Union High School.



The group (named the Nocturnals for its late-night rehearsals) expanded when Ludlow native Scott Tournet, a Goddard College graduate living in Canton, joined on guitar. The band was becoming a serious project by the time Burr graduated in 2003, and relocated to Vermont without Beard, replacing him with bass player Bryan Dondero.

The band released its first CD, "Original Soul," last spring. Chuck Eller recorded that disc at his studios in Charlotte and recorded the band's forthcoming release, tentatively titled "Nothing But the Water," in November at the Haybarn on the Goddard campus in Plainfield. The new CD will likely be released this spring.

Eller has worked with some notable musicians, including Dr. John, Taj Mahal, Richard Thompson, Trey Anastasio and Bonnie Raitt. He said Raitt and Potter have similarities, especially their soulfulness, though Potter has more vocal range.

"Gracie has an amazing voice, really one of the best voices I've ever recorded, and I've recorded Shawn Colvin," Eller said Wednesday while the band was at his studio touching up songs for the new CD. "She just blows me away."

'In your soul'

She blows Doug Gordon away, too. The 42-year-old carpenter from Martha's Vineyard, Mass., is something of a Grace Potter groupie, having seen her and the Nocturnals in recent months in Bellows Falls, Boston and Great Barrington, Mass. He was in the packed crowd Tuesday at Nectar's for the first night of the band's residency.

Gordon, who became addicted to their sound when a friend loaned him a Nocturnals' CD last summer, said he wants to see the band before they become so big he can't just walk into a venue and see them play for free.

"I have great friends in bands that I wouldn't go to see, but I'll go see Grace," Gordon said between the Nocturnals' first and second sets Tuesday. He said Potter's voice makes him feel the way he felt the first time he heard Bonnie Raitt. "It's something that goes in your soul."

The band is hearing a lot of praise these days. The Nocturnals opened for New York City soft-rockers Hem at Club Metronome in November, and Hem singer Sally Ellyson said shortly after taking the stage "How about Grace Potter!" with a bulging-eyes look that conveyed not just perfunctory politeness but "Did you hear what I just heard?" admiration.

"When musicians above you say that," Burr said, "it gives you chills."

The kudos aren't just for Potter, either. Tournet drew hoots and hollers Tuesday for his inspired but controlled guitar solos that often resembled a more bluesy version of Dire Straits' Mark Knopfler. Burr and Dondero provided a stellar backbeat and a carefree, affable atmosphere. The band mates often exchanged amused glances and laughter, especially when they connected as they did on the incendiary, blues-flavored tune "Lovers Lost and Found."

Some bands say they're close-knit, but the Nocturnals really are. Potter and Burr are a couple, and the four live in one of the Potters' old sign-company warehouses, affectionately dubbed "Hobbitville."

Sharing their music

They're also close-knit in their desire to land a good record deal, but not just a big record deal. They want one that suits their independent spirit that's about music first, stardom second. Burr said the band has heard from major recording companies such as Universal, but they're not leaping at the first offer.

Eller is surprised at how mature the band is, not just Potter's songwriting but also the band's business acumen.

"They've been very smart business-wise. They've had more record-company attention than any band I've seen come through here in awhile," said Eller, who has worked with local heavyweights such as Vorcza, Jazz Mandolin Project, Gordon Stone, Jennifer Hartswick, Seth Yacovone and Elisabeth von Trapp. "They've been careful not to burn any bridges but not to jump into anything too quickly."

The band plans to shop its forthcoming CD around to music-industry types in March at the South By Southwest Conference in Austin, Texas. They intend to resist companies who, in typical rock-music fashion, might suggest that the strong female lead ditch her band and strike out on her own. "We just don't want to do that," Potter said. "We don't want to be 'sell-out,' straight up."

They do want to be big. Tournet said, only half-jokingly, that his dream is that the Nocturnals no longer have to open for other bands.

"The goal," according to Potter, "would be to share our music -- and this is a little cliché -- with as many people as possible."

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