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## Dawn for the Nocturnals

By Brent Hallenbeck

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SHELBURNE -- It's not hard to imagine the feelings a young band might have in the days leading to the release of its first major-label album: nervousness, anxiety, maybe something close to panic.

None of those feelings apply to Grace Potter and the Nocturnals. Potter's confident approach to Tuesday's debut of "This Is Somewhere" echoes her typically blunt talk and the Waitsfield band's straight-ahead take on rock 'n' roll.

"It's just a sense of accomplishment, the fact that we made it this far without any hitches at all," the 24-year-old vocalist/keyboardist/guitarist said. "I have no trepidations about this, not just the record but the whole ascent."

Vermont has been watching and listening to that ascent for three years now, following the foursome's development from a small, quiet club act to a big, loud, bluesy rock band capable of drawing thousands to its home-state shows and increasingly large, rabid crowds as it tours the nation. Potter and her boyfriend, Nocturnals drummer Matt Burr, are inveterate music junkies who talked about the latest step in their ascent while attending the recent sold-out concert by Wilco at the Shelburne Museum -- a site where, less than a year earlier, the Nocturnals attracted nearly 3,000 fans for their own show.

Some songs the band unveiled at that Labor Day weekend concert, including the Dylanesque political tune "Ain't No Time" and the spiritual "Big White Gate," are among the 11 tracks on "This Is Somewhere." The new disc on Disney-owned Hollywood Records also features a couple of longtime concert favorites, including a quietly passionate version of the heartbreak song "Apologies" and a rendition of "Stop the Bus" that nearly matches the intensity the full-out rock number creates on stage.

"This Is Somewhere" also includes a couple of songs already inspiring controversy among Nocturnals devotees. Potter said listeners have given her flak for a couple of the glossier tunes, especially "Mr. Columbus," which certainly has the peppiest chorus and most pop-a-licious chords of any tune the band has recorded.

Fans assume that sound came from pressure by the record label. Burr said the album's producer, Mike Daly (an alumnus of Ryan Adams' old band, Whiskeytown), was contractually required to produce "radio-friendly" songs, but the decision to record a couple of slicker songs was the band's alone.

"I set out to write good pop songs," said Potter, whose tracks for the new album include the single "Ah Mary," a cagey protest song that merges a pop sensibility with the blues-rocking nature the Nocturnals are known for. "People aren't ready for us to sound like a pop band."

The transition from uncompromising rockers to something more complex didn't always go smoothly. Potter, Burr, guitarist Scott Tournet and bass player Bryan Dondero recorded the album late last year in California and almost immediately ran into trouble when Daly told them about the requirement for "radio-friendly" songs.

"We all were like, 'Oh, God,' and dropped our instruments," Burr said. Potter said the admittedly bull-headed band ("We question authority a lot," she said) argued regularly with the studio engineers about details such as which amp to use, disagreements that illuminated rare moments of insecurity in the Nocturnals.

"It was painful," Potter said. "We were scared about the process and losing ourselves in it."

Now that the final product is in, the band realizes that stress helped give the album its nearly-live energy. "There's this audible conflict that to me makes the sound so much more interesting," Potter said.

Tuesday's release date represents the Nocturnals official unveiling to the world beyond Vermont. The band, which has a two-album deal with Hollywood, wants the album to hit it big right away. Bob Cavallo, the veteran rock-music mogul who heads Hollywood Records, cautioned the band not to worry if the first album doesn't "hit it out of the park." That's a comforting notion coming from a record label known for instant hits from performers such as Hilary Duff.

"Deep down inside he wants it to go far," Burr said of Cavallo, who was instrumental in signing the band to Hollywood. "All of us do. But he understands with our kind of music that it might take awhile to go."

*Brent Hallenbeck*