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Norfolk Arts Team



Lizzie West, Baba Buffalo and Dharma Dog at home in Norfolk.

By way of Wisconsin, Boston, New York and Missouri, Lizzie West and Baba Buffalo and their dog, Dharma Dog, have arrived in Norfolk to hibernate for the winter. With a past in the traditional music industry model and a future bent on creating a more organic, imaginative standard, the singer-songwriter duo is savoring their new idyllic, remote county scene and waiting for spring.

The self-described “Renaissance artists,” who while in Norfolk are finishing a novel and drawing house portraits on commission, met in Manhattan in 2005.

Originally from Wisconsin, Mr. Buffalo attended the New England Conservatory in Boston for three years before he decided to stop paying tuition to play music and go it alone. He moved to New York City, taking the traditional starving artist day job of waiting tables.

Ms. West grew up in Manhattan, the daughter of Broadway producer and writer Louise Westergaard. Because she had worked at the same restaurant as Mr. Buffalo some time before, the two had mutual friends and spent months knowing of each other peripherally.

One night on the Upper East Side they met at one of Ms. West’s shows, and though Mr. Buffalo usually shied away from singing in front of a crowd, she coaxed him on stage. They immediately recognized the personal and musical connection.

“It took us about two months to get organized and we’ve been inseparable since then,” Ms. West said. The two were married in October of 2007.

Their music merges folk with blues and rock, and ragtime with cabaret, with a strong undercurrent of storytelling. Singing lead, Ms. West’s voice has been described as what Natalie Merchant would sound like if she had meat in her teeth, and while it sometimes affects a tinny, rougher shading, its quality can fluctuate to weightless and is tempered by Mr. Buffalo’s harmony.

The lyrics reflect social activism rather than a political agenda and spiritual notes rather than religious doctrine. Ms. West explained that the duo applies the art form to the core of experiences and issues. Their fans range from the 5-year-olds to 80-year-olds.

“We really like to cross all the genres and use poetry to weave all

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Above, Lizzie West and Baba Buffalo in performance in a photograph they provided. Right, a patch for one of their efforts.

the songs together,” Ms. West said. “It’s music in the key of man.”

Certainly the Lizzie West and Baba Buffalo show would appeal to all ages, being reminiscent of other famous musician couples for the older crowds and with the ever-present cardboard cutout of Dharma Dog for the younger followers. Besides the guitar, Ms. West plays the harmonica and ukulele. Mr. Buffalo added that her dancing should be counted as well.

“She’s got some dangerous hips,” he laughed.

Trained on the piano, he also performs on the bass, accordion

and guitar and has rigged up a system of manning a tambourine with his left foot and a bass drum with his right.

Moving forward, the duo is in an advantageous position to evaluate the music industry from an educated, experienced point of view. In 2003, Warner Brothers produced Ms. West’s second full length album “Holy Road: Freedom Songs.” She had self-released the first in 2000. From the beginning, there were differences in opinions, which came to a head over the song “19 Miles to Bagdad.” The tambourine-filled folk song discussing the Iraq War

and 9/11 that ends with the question “What have we become?” was ruled out by Warner Brothers studio heads. They told her it had no place in the culture, a thinly-veiled, profit-driven logic.

“It was one of several instances of censorship,” Ms. West said.

Appleseed Recording, an independent label based in West Chester, Pa., released the duo’s first joint album in 2006, including “19 Miles to Bagdad.” Democracy Now, the progressive radio and TV show, featured the song. The spot connected the duo with Cameron Melville, a musician and venue

organizer who is currently building an outlet of Club Helsinki in Great Barrington, Mass., on the Hudson River in New York. He brought them to Norfolk and shares their interest in crafting an alternative music industry model. “We see music as a lifestyle,” Ms. West explained.

Thus, drawing from their music, their beliefs and their history, Holy Road Tours Union has a foundation in the three A’s: arts, agriculture and activism. It plans to connect venues across the country, an idea to which Mr. Melville provides essentially input, as well as houses. Artists would be able to settle in an area for longer periods of time rather than passing through for one-night shows. Ms. West and Mr. Buffalo lived in Columbia, Mo., for about a year and a half before moving to Norfolk and made a place for themselves in the city with their folk opera “The Tumbleweed Cabaret.” They’re set on planting roots in Litchfield County, too, having played at the Norfolk Library already and scheduled to perform at the Battelle Chapel in March.

Artists sharing the same van might even figure into Holy Road Tours Union eventually, a nod to leaving a smaller carbon footprint. More and more bands are altering their forms of transportation while touring. Ms. West pointed to a ska punk group, the Ginger Ninjas, who biked across the U.S. and Mexico, powering their amplifiers with the generated energy.

According to both musicians, the music industry of major labels and national 30-plus city tours is breaking down. It is no long financially or environmentally feasible or healthy for artists. The burnout factor, drugs, depression and suicide are symptoms of a dysfunctional structure that isolates musicians. Ms. West and Mr. Buffalo’s idea and growing movement ascribes to the similar folk movement in the 1960s, when music reverted back to forms before the sugary pop of the 1950s as well as rebelling against political and social norms.

“As the times are changing, people do long for something more organic,” Ms. West said, before catching her unintentional 1960s reference.

In writing lyrics and chords, she and Mr. Buffalo cited Bob Dylan as an influence. Her inspiration comes from Bessie Smith, Peggy Lee, Patsy Cline and Phoebe Snow, while his list includes Pete Seeger, Cat Stevens, Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young.

“We’re sort of entrenched in the past,” Ms. West said with a laugh.

However, for all their other eras qualities, the duo is moving very much toward the future.

“Noody wants a world without music,” Ms. West said.

For more information on Lizzie West and Baba Buffalo, show listings or albums, visit their scrapbook style Web site www.lizzieandbaba.com.

