

Pop Talk: The Hold Steady holds steady on odd career path

by Nina Garin

Nothing about The Hold Steady makes any sense.

Like how so many critics fawn over the Brooklyn-based band even though its sound isn't arty or dancey or even all that catchy.

THE HOLD STEADY - This photo is the only way you can tell The Hold Steady is from New York - the band's music and attitude is rooted in old-fashioned Mid-western charm. CNS Photo courtesy of Marina Chavez. For all the buzz - and there's been a lot of it - The Hold Steady plays surprisingly mainstream rock reminiscent of Bruce Springsteen or The Replacements. Except singer Craig Finn rants more than sings and the guitar solos are a bit on the crunchy side.

Still, such super-elitist Web sites as Pitchfork and Stereogum ranked the band's "Boys and Girls in America" in their Top 5 albums of 2006. Blender magazine named The Hold Steady as its Band of the Year.

Which doesn't make a lot of sense, even to the five guys in the group.

"I'm not exactly sure why the press gave us so much attention. I think we were at a point where no one in indie music was having any fun," said guitarist Tad Kubler. "We wanted to create an atmosphere where we include everyone in the party."

The Hold Steady formed in 2000, a time when other New York bands like The Strokes and Interpol were making music for those too-cool club kids who wore lots of black eyeliner and flat shoes.

Even though Kubler and Finn lived in the trendiest part of Brooklyn, the Minneapolis/Milwaukee transplants weren't feeling the whole New Wave resurgence that was going on in the city.

So instead of trying to be like their new neighbors, they wrote songs about what they left behind: life in the Midwest.

There are lyrics about making beer runs and kissing girls in the middle of the night, like: "I was kicking it with cousins / We were talking about going clubbing / Instead we just started drinking."

Kubler said that even though they don't write about New York, the city influenced them in other ways.

"New York is an artistic city and it forces you to operate on a higher level than anywhere else," Kubler said. "We thought we're just playing drunk bar rock with guitar solos. We didn't think anyone would want to listen. But it turns out they did want to listen."

That's another thing that doesn't add up. The Hold Steady has a rabid fan base even though its music rarely gets played on the radio.

But the band has built its reputation at its live shows. A Hold Steady party is a lot like a Guided By Voices party: loud music, sing-along lyrics and many, many beers.

At one point, the band used to play for more than two hours, sometimes even longer. Finn can go through a six-pack while performing. Usually the audience has had much more than that.

"We don't have as much material as Guided By Voices," Kubler said. "But there is a lot of booze involved and it's always a good time. I also like that GBV was very inclusive of everyone. That's certainly a philosophy we try to take from them."

Though it's easy to see the similarities between The Hold Steady and other Midwestern bands, the group takes inspiration from less obvious sources, too.

Take the title of the album, "Boys and Girls in America." That comes from a line in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road."

Finn read the book as a kid but didn't really get it. But when he re-read it at age 32, he thought it was beautiful and was inspired to create an entire album from one line.

"Sometimes, you just need a little perspective," Kubler said.

And actually, with some perspective, The Hold Steady does make sense.

See, a couple of beers, American rock and some modern literature are exactly the things that can make a band earn a place in most anyone's heart. And, more importantly, their stereos.

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