

Pop Talk: The Brunettes - Kiwi-style sweet songs

by Nina Garin

There's a new place where all the cool new things are coming from and it's nowhere near Nebraska or Canada or London or even Mexico.

If you want to find the freshest crop of talent, look way, way, far away to New Zealand. That's where the sweet and quirky indie group The Brunettes comes from.

THE BRUNETTES - The Brunettes are the latest export to come from New Zealand. CNS Photo courtesy of Milana Radojic. OK, so New Zealand is also where they filmed "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy. And it's known to be home to lots of sheep. But, really, there's more than nerdy hobbit lore and farming happening in the small country near Australia.

Those who have HBO may already know this thanks to the charming and wry comedy "Flight of the Choncords," which features a duo of lovable, innocent Kiwi comics.

And now The Brunettes are bringing New Zealand more hype with its sweet and quirky music. The band recently signed to Sub Pop Records (as did "Flight of the Choncords") and is out on its first headlining tour.

"There's a big difference between the States and New Zealand," said singer Heather Mansfield, with a slight Kiwi accent. "In New Zealand, we only have four centers where you can play. There's only 4 million people in the whole country."

And, from the constant rotating lineup, it would seem that most of those people have played with The Brunettes over its 10-year history. Even though the band is fronted by singers Mansfield and Jonathan Bree, there are always about six or seven musicians they bring on tour to play instruments like the marimba, harmonica, trumpet, clarinet and saxophone.

"We have a very cramped tour van," said Mansfield. "There's always someone sitting on the floor."

Though the group itself may be quite clunky, the music is the complete opposite. Delicate harmonies and high-pitched, sugary vocals are the trademark of the band's latest album, "Structure and Cosmetics." But as the group begins its trek across America, Mansfield doesn't expect to be too culture shocked.

A few years ago, The Brunettes went on tour with The Shins, an opportunity that Mansfield said changed the band's path.

"If it wasn't for that tour, we'd still be in New Zealand. That changed everything," Mansfield said. "Playing to The Shins crowd was like nothing we've ever done, like we were in a movie where we would play these sold-out shows to extremely excited fans. We were lucky enough that the fans were excited about us, too."

The band members also learned some helpful tips from that experience that they plan to use now that they're touring on their own. Like not to bring 10 musicians along. And, definitely, leave the cello at home.

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