

Black Prairie

Featuring members of the Decemberists, Black Prairie crafts spooky, cinematic acoustic music.

By Céline Keating



Black Prairie (from left): Annalisa Tornfelt, Chris Funk, Jenny Conlee, Nate Query, and Jon Neufeld.

YOU COULD SAY a dobro was the genesis of Black Prairie, an atmospheric, genre-bending, string-with-a-twist band. Chris Funk, guitarist for indie rock group the Decemberists, was looking for a project that would allow him to focus on his square-neck resonator, so he enlisted band members Nate Query (bass) and Jenny Conlee (accordion), as well as fiddler Annalisa Tornfelt (Bearfoot, Woolwines) and guitarist Jon Neufeld (Jackstraw, Dolorean). Two and a half years later, without ever having performed live, the Portland, Oregon, quintet secured a recording contract with roots music label Sugar Hill, which has released the group's debut album, *Feast of the Hunters' Moon*.

Just about everything about Black Prairie is unconventional. There's the quirky instrumental lineup, for one thing: from the beginning the group knew it didn't want to be a straight-up bluegrass or string band—it lacks banjo and mandolin, for example—and the band members held no other preconceived notions. Funk plays Weissenborn and dobro (as well as bouzouki), while Neufeld gravitates toward the archtop's chunky midrange and cut-through-the-mix volume (see "The Archtop's Sonic Sweet Spot" on right). "When we started playing we didn't really know each other, and [we] had this loose idea of what a band could sound like with that instrumentation," Funk says. The group's eclectic styles and influences—bluegrass and old-time, jazz and Gypsy jazz, traditional Romanian music and klezmer—somehow merge into a supple, coherent sound that both respects and defies those boundaries.

Collective Tune-Smithing

An atypical approach to developing their material was part of the concept, too, more akin to a workshop than a rehearsal model. "The idea of the band was everybody [would] bring a couple of formed ideas or maybe genres, and we [would] all work on them together," Funk says. "So everybody has their roots in different songs. Annalisa and I really like traditional Romanian [music]. Jenny loves tango and Astor Piazzolla. As we're playing more and more, we're starting to shake out a sound that's interesting to us."

Given this collective approach to tune-smithing—what the group calls "the Black Prairie filter"—Neufeld says the finished songs on *Feast of the Hunters' Moon* rarely resemble their early versions. "It expands exponentially when we all get together," he says. For instance, the rollicking, bluegrass-inflected "Home Made Lemonade," which features his wickedly fast picking (he uses his fingers as well as pick, hybrid style), "started off as a kind of three-chord tune and ended up with 13 [chords], and a classical section and a minor section—a little string band-sounding tune that I wrote on my front porch turned into this whole other thing."

Unlike most groups, which are under financial or record company constraints to complete a project, Black Prairie had the luxury of time. But looseness and lack of pressure have their drawbacks. "I look at my iTunes now and there are endless MP3 sessions from rehearsals," Funk says. "We were so wallowing in our creativity [that we] could have been endlessly rearranging songs." To help them help themselves, the group enlisted Tucker Martine, who has produced the Decemberists and Laura Veirs. "He was perfect for it because of his background not only in pop music, but also [because] he works with people like Bill Frisell and Brian Blade and lots of jazz people," Funk says.

The Archtop's Sonic Sweet Spot

Jon Neufeld says that the archtop's strong suit is that it sits in the same frequency range as the human voice. "Many guitars are battling for the low and the high, with a dip in the midrange, whereas the archtop has a kind of boost in the midrange," he says. "So from a sound perspective it has an effect on the driving part of the music. That was like a light bulb that went off for me when I started playing the archtop. It seems like it sits in the mix differently, too. The [archtop's] volume level when you mix things—[it takes] up less space in the overall mix."

JASON QUIGLEY

As Black Prairie honed its sound under the watchful eye of Martine, multi-instrumentalist and songwriter Sarah Jarosz asked for permission to cover a Decemberists song (Colin Meloy's "Shankill Butchers") on her debut album, *Song Up in Her Head*. Funk, a huge bluegrass fan, took the opportunity to tell Jarosz's label, Sugar Hill, about the Black Prairie project, which quickly led to a record deal. "Black Prairie wasn't something any of us thought would land with momentum," Funk says. "All our friends were just laughing. They're like, 'We can't believe you guys got a record deal and haven't even played a show.'"

Cinematic Mystery

Feast of the Hunters' Moon has a palpable air of mystery and an epic quality, like a movie score. "Across the Black Prairie" opens with a deliciously shrill fiddle before shifting to a loping melody that calls to mind a line of covered wagons under a dark foreboding sky. It segues into the traditional "Red Rocking Chair," with Tornfelt's deliberately deadened vocals and an echo chamber effect lending spooky support to lyrics about an empty cradle. The juxtaposition with "Back Alley" (where Funk delivers exuberant, slap-happy slide and Neufeld provides minor-key, jazzy variations) only sharpens the listener's uneasiness—what happened to that baby, exactly?

The mostly instrumental music teases the imagination throughout. On "Ostinato del Caminito," one of the standouts on the album, the players egg each other on with the racing propulsiveness of a chase worthy of the Wicked Witch of the West. However disparate their influences, Black Prairie's songs are similar in having multipart arrangements, bringing to mind Baroque or classical music. Yet the band's music flows so organically that it doesn't draw attention to its sophistication. Guitar, accordion, fiddle, and bass elegantly twist and turn around each other, fluidly trading background and foreground, and the chunky tones of Neufeld's archtop and Funk's zesty yet soulful slide play off each other on the lovely "Annie McGuire" and "Atrocity at Celilo Falls."

"We like to have the angles and edges," Funk says of the obvious delight the musicians take in wrestling dissonance from their instruments (he uses a violin bow for a drone effect, as well as an EBow). Funk says the group's sound "just came from playing and everyone being open-minded to everyone's ideas and contributing. Looking back I don't really know how we landed on those sounds." Neufeld attributes some of the group's adventurousness to the fact that for all the musicians, Black Prairie was at first a side project. "We were able to mess around with songs, and we

weren't necessarily incredibly driven to record them," he says. "We felt very free."

The experimentation and creative collaboration is sure to continue, even though Black Prairie is now officially a band, with a tour in progress. "My real dream is to sort of merge the indie rock world with the folk world and bluegrass world—have a singer from some indie rock band, [have] us be the band, and then have Norman Blake play guitar on it," Funk says. "We'll see if that gets off the ground." AC

Céline Keating is a writer and editor living in New York City. Keating regularly reviews albums for Acoustic Guitar and other magazines and studies classical guitar. Her novel, Layla, is forthcoming.

WHAT THEY PLAY

JON NEUFELD

- **ACOUSTIC GUITARS:** 2003 custom archtop made by luthier John Sullivan of Portland, Oregon, with a German spruce top, Oregon maple back and sides, and mahogany neck. Sullivan, who died in 2007, made only three archtops, and Neufeld's was the first. "[Sullivan] left [the neck] unfinished so it's really smooth," Neufeld says. He uses very fine sandpaper to lightly sand the neck before he plays. "Your hand just glides across it," he says.
- **STRINGS:** D'Addario medium phosphor-bronze.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Neumann KM 184 mic. Schertler acoustic guitar amp and Schertler contact mic as needed.
- **CAPO:** Paige.

CHRIS FUNK

- **INSTRUMENTS:** Custom 2009 Clinesmith (clinesmithinstruments.com) square-neck, lap-style dobro with a spruce top, rosewood back and sides, and custom inlay by Steve Jacobsen (redwoodcoastinlay.com), tuned to G or G sus. 2008 Breedlove Weissenborn-style acoustic lap steel with an all-koa body (tuned to open D). Trinity College Celtic-style bouzouki.
- **STRINGS:** D'Addario EXP42 on the dobro. D'Addario EJ42 on the Breedlove.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** Fishman Jerry Douglas Aura pedal and a Radial DI in the dobro. K&K pickup direct to a Radial DI on the Breedlove. K&K pickup on the bouzouki.
- **ACCESSORIES:** Scheerhorn slide for the dobro. Scheerhorn Flux capo. Dunlop Zookies 20-degree thumbpick and ProPik No. 2 fingerpicks. Shubb GS-1 resophonic steel bar slide. Wegen picks for the bouzouki.

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