

24 Carrot Gold

Folk duo WILD CARROT channels their inner Jazz child on I've Heard That Song Before

By BRIAN BAKER

"Don't name your band after anything that can be put on a mug," says WILD CARROT vocalist/guitarist Pam Temple, offering a cup of coffee adorned with their namesake vegetable. "Over the years we've been given hundreds of things with carrots on them. We have carrot dog toys." Temple and guitarist/mandolinist/vocalist Spencer Funk, partners in music and life, have accepted carrot-themed gifts for the better part of a decade, a trend likely to continue with their third wild carrot album, the Jazz/Swing standards set *I've Heard That Song Before*.

The pair met when Funk was running the Queen City Balladeers at Leo Coffeehouse in the early '90s (he still books talent there and invites all interested parties to check out the Norwood Folk institution) and Temple showed up for an open mic night.

"I was impressed with what she was doing musically," says Funk from the living room of the couple's Oakley home. "Whenever she was in town, we would get together and organize some music, but she wasn't in town that often; she was in school and the Peace Corps."

The Cincinnati natives eventually became a couple with Temple's return home. Funk was earning a living from music (giving private guitar lessons and playing out), while Temple was employed as an occupational therapist and accompanied Funk on his musical endeavors. As the WILD CARROT concept began to take root (insert your own plant-related metaphor), Temple began trimming her day job hours.

"I went from full-time to part-time to contractor as we got busier with music," says Temple. "I finally called my contract agencies and said, 'I don't think I'm going to be back. I'm going to try this other thing.' It's been eight years."

Between 1996 and 1998, Funk, Temple and engineer Colin Cordy recorded demos at 89.7FM WNKU's studio, which ultimately became *Defined...*, WILD CARROT's 1999 debut.

Initially a cassette released to attract gigs, Funk was persuaded by fans to reissue it on CD in 2001. The duo followed that up with *Hope* in 2003, widely recognized as one of the best local albums that year and lavishly praised in the Folk bible, *Sing Out!* In the meantime, Funk continued his student programs and Temple volunteered at WNKU radio to thank the station for their active support of WILD CARROT. She eventually became a station fixture.

"They gave me more responsibilities and when Niki Dakota left, they said, 'Would you consider applying for this position?'," says Temple. "And I'm like, 'We're doing this music thing and we have this vision and plan.' And they said they'd work with us and there were health benefits."

Other musician friends of ours were like, 'What, are you nuts? Take the gig!' It's been a nice mutual relationship; fans of ours become members of the station and members find out about us through WNKU and come to gigs." Not long after, Funk and Temple visited New York and dropped in on Temple's uncle, renowned Jazz pianist Hank Ross (student of Teddy Wilson at Julliard, longtime member of the Red Onion Jazz Band), and the trio jammed on some old standards, some that were already in WILD CARROT's eclectic set list. They all began thinking about the possibility of recording.

"We sent him a list of songs we were doing and there were a couple he didn't want to do," recalls Temple. "Every once in a while, a little cassette would show up in the mail with a note that said, 'Learn this one, guys,' and it's him with one of those old push button recorders on his piano with my aunt singing in the background. The last track on the CD is my aunt from one of



Wild Carrot

PHOTO COURTESY WILD CARROT

those demos.”

Ross assembled a group of musicians — clarinetist Pete Martinez, trumpeter Simon Wettenhall (who plays with Woody Allen’s band) and bassist David Dreiwitz (who plays Jazz and also tours with Ween) — and Funk and Temple chose and arranged some tunes and, after some guidance from the 80-something Ross, the project was a go. “We would come up with our own folky versions of the chord changes and my uncle would say, ‘You know I love you guys, but these charts are messed up,’ ” says Temple with a laugh. “We learned a lot and that was part of our goal in doing it. He’s a treasure, a walking history lesson in the genre.”

After two brief sessions, the material Funk and Temple had considered a personal vanity project began looking more like an actual album. They released it in September (as WILD CARROT with Hank Ross) to a similar level of acclaim as their previous two releases.

“It was a cakewalk for Pam, for me it was work,” says Funk with a laugh. “I do a lot of different styles, but going to New York and playing with players that this is what they do, I was stretching just to get up to snuff.

Really after the first session, we knew we wanted to take it through completely, so we scheduled the second session.” “This new CD really feels like a one-off thing,” says Temple. “It doesn’t represent a change in what we do, it was just an opportunity to go to New York, work with my uncle and play with these guys and do some songs we do anyway. I’m really happy with it.” Music continues to inform every aspect of the couple’s lives, from their music education school programs geared for every grade level to an outreach for senior citizens (which dovetails nicely with *I’ve Heard That Song Before*), from Temple’s on-air WNKU shifts to Funk’s ongoing Leo Coffeehouse duties and private music lessons, not to mention WILD CARROT.

“One way or another,” says Temple, “it’s all music related. And we make a living. We’re lucky.”

For more on WILD CARROT (including show dates), go to wildcarrot.net.