

How sweet it is: Motown inspires local (nearly) all-girl group The Vallures

By Jimmy Jenkins

Special to the H-T

July 15, 2012, last update: 7/15 @ 12:39 am

BLOOMINGTON — “We are The Vallures and we play music from the past.”

This is how Jessica Franco introduced her band earlier this year to a packed house at The Bishop, before ripping through an energetic set of soul-inspired covers and original tunes.

The band, which turned two years old in March, has also graced the stage at notable Bloomington music spots including Players' Pub, Rhino's and Max's Place, where they recently sat down to discuss their music.

The creation of The Vallures was something of a reaction to Franco's previous musical project Coinslot, a punk/rock/ska band.

“The rest of the band was all guys, and all of the other bands we would play with featured guys. It was a really male-dominated scene,” Franco said. “I was tired of being lost in a sea of dudes. So moving on from that experience, I started by putting out a call on Craigslist with the idea of forming a girl group that did all Motown tunes, but was a little more hardcore, like (Japanese female rock group) The 5.6.7.8's. I wanted to form a group that I would like to go see.”

With that in mind, The Vallures began as a soul and Motown influenced group, taking cues from contemporary acts such as Amy Winehouse, Rafael Sadiq and Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings.

Like many successful artists, they have made what was once old now seem new, as well as put a modern spin on traditional songs to make them their own.

Falling in love with Motown and soul

The five female members of The Vallures did not come from a soul-or Motown-specific background, but all have fallen in love with the music. Keyboard player and backup vocalist Libby Scherer was trained in classical piano but has taken easily to the funkier phrasing.

“Being in this band has been a real learning experience, but we play such great tunes. It's all so funky and feel-good.”

Guitarist and backup vocalist Meredith Hubbell added that there is also a distinct thematic appeal.

“This music celebrates timeless themes of love and romance and heartbreak, which everyone young and old can relate to. It reminds me of a wholesome time, a different idea of what it means to be sexy.”

At 21, drummer Danielle Graf is the youngest Vallure, but her musical interests transcend time. Currently a drum instructor at the Melody Music Shop and an IU student, she has an extensive percussion background that took her from orchestra and concert band to jazz and funk drumming.

“I never really saw myself ending up in an all-girl Motown band,” Graf said, “but it was destiny. After two years playing this music, I've really grown fond of it, the soul, baby, the passion — it's all so fun!”

Working the crowd

The band's effort and determination has led to fun for their crowds, as well.

“We are a hard working band,” Franco said. “The expectations for this music are so high because the songs are so iconic, and most people have never heard them live before.”

Practicing twice a week, The Vallures put on a tightly run show that is well received by audiences of all ages.

However, they were a little apprehensive about playing the Chocolate Prom at Rhino's, an event for local high schoolers.

“We didn't know what to expect,” Franco said of the younger audience, “but they loved it. They danced like crazy. Of course, when you get kids hopped up on chocolate, it's not that difficult to get them to move.”

Getting people to move is a Vallures specialty. At their Bishop performance, Franco was joined on stage by two dancers — Melodie Marie Cutsinger, an IU dance major, and Mary Hogue of the Bloomington Burlesque Brigade. Before the show, the ladies instructed the crowd on how to do traditional dances like the Boogaloo, the Funky Chicken, the Mashed Potato and the Swim so they could participate with the group's carefully choreographed performance.

The audience response was enthusiastic, featuring a lot of sweating, jumping and grooving — even a Soul Train Dance Line. It was a fairly impressive reaction from a venue where head nodding is often the rowdiest form of crowd participation.

“It really makes us play better,” Scherer said of the enthusiasm. “The give-and-take with the crowd just elevates everything.”

Known by her bandmates as the “Wall of Sound,” percussionist, trumpet player and backup vocalist Laura Wanner has a favorite dance partner: her tambourine.

Coming from an Irish folk music background, Wanner could previously be seen busking on the streets of Bloomington. But the music she now plays with The Vallures has always called to her.

“More often than not, I found myself switching to the oldies stations because that's where I'd find music that lifted me in the first measure. The Jackson 5, Sam and Dave, CCR, The Temptations — those are the groups that have always made me want to dance.”

A complete package

Taking further cues from the Motown era, the band coordinates colorful dresses and period makeup and hairstyles to produce an eye-popping spectacle on stage.

"We dress to the nines and put on a rockin' show," Franco confidently stated. "We try to be a professional band but still have a great time."

The bold style matches the intensity embodied by Franco on stage. A strong vocal presence, Franco has learned how to work a crowd. Speaking of her performance debut at age 9 at her Catholic church in Gary she said, "As soon as I was on stage, it was like 'this is fun, this is great, this is power! Let's do it again!'"

Yet her taste for power is tempered with a devotion to her audience. "When I was in a punk band, we would sometimes only play for three people. But you know what? We made sure those people got the show of their lives."

Franco's dedication remains the same to Vallures' crowds, which are never small in number.

There is one dude

Over time, The Vallures have greatly expanded upon the genres they draw from and, therefore, their own identity. Bassist, and the only male Vallure, Bryce Martin gets credit from the group for broadening their horizons. A member of several other music projects, he brings a love of music that spans genres, but like the rest of the group, concentrates mainly on the 1950s and '60s.

Martin, who showed up to Max's Place with a few newly acquired Nina Simone and Meters LPs under his arm, noted that the mid-century musical revolution was not specific to America.

"The '60s happened across the globe. Music scenes changed everywhere, even in Peru. It's important to remember that this awakening wasn't just happening in the United States and England."

When searching for inspiration, the band looks for deep cuts from tiny labels to resurrect and perform next to the favorites from the Motown giants. Now the group has come to symbolize the celebration of a time period, instead of a specific musical genre.

"It's like we stepped into a stream of influence," Martin said, "and we've all been swept up in it and carried away."

Pen to paper

While developing a sizeable catalog of cover songs to perform, the group has also begun writing their own music.

"We really had to start writing immediately, because most of these songs don't have an ending," Franco noted of the tendency for Motown tracks to end in a studio fade-out. Now the group collaborates to write songs that blend seamlessly with their renditions of Del Shannon's "Runaway," The Spencer Davis Group's "Gimme Some Lovin'" and crowd favorite, "Shout."

"We're taking what we've learned and applying it," Martin said. "We want to be more than a cover band. We want to be like a really great DJ."

The band is very grateful for all of the support they have received from the community. Apart from packing dance floors at their shows, their fans have supported them in other meaningful ways.

After having more than \$16,000 in equipment stolen while playing a gig in Chicago last year, friends let them borrow equipment and a benefit was held at Max's Place to help the band replace their gear. Enough money was raised to completely replace and upgrade their instruments.

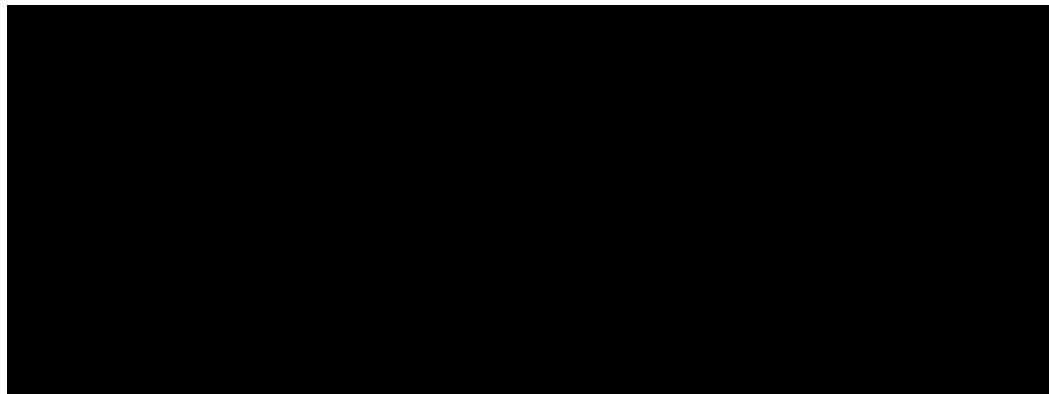
Listeners can find videos of The Vallures on Vimeo, which were made with the help of local production group Midwest Underground.

The group's upcoming gigs can be found at www.reverbnation.com/thevallures.

The Vallures on stage today

The Vallures will perform a free show today at Upland Brewery's new location at 4060 Profile Parkway, Bloomington. The celebration of Upland's expansion is 4-8 p.m., with The Vallures on at 6:25 p.m., according to their site, www.reverbnation.com/thevallures.

See <http://uplandbeer.com> for more on today's Upland party.





click photos to advance (6 photos)

Jessica Franco, lead singer of the Bloomington band The Vallures, belts into a microphone during band practice. "I was tired of being lost in a sea of dudes," she said of deciding to form The Vallures, an almost-all-girl band. Steph Langan | Herald-Times