



Tara Nevins and other members of Donna the Buffalo perform at the GrassRoots Festival in 2018.

REUNITING THE HERD

Donna the Buffalo moves bodies and spirits through its GrassRoots Festival

by Erin Donaghue

AMOS PERRINE

N 1991, THE MEMBERS OF DONNA

the Buffalo found themselves creating music amid the worldwide AIDS crisis. The western New York-based Americana band rounded up friends and held a benefit concert at the State Theatre of Ithaca to support the fight against the deadly virus. It was so successful that what started off as a single show evolved into a yearly festival, the Finger Lakes GrassRoots Festival of Music & Dance in nearby Trumansburg.

More than 30 years later, GrassRoots is still a local mainstay that draws nationally renowned headliners and a devoted crew of festivalgoers, many of whom are part of Donna the Buffalo's self-organized fan group, lovingly dubbed The Herd. But Donna the Buffalo is once again finding itself creating music amid a global health emergency: this time, COVID-19.

Co-founder, singer, and guitarist Jeb Puryear describes one of the band's functions as bringing magic by creating joy in a crisis. And after two years of postponements, stress, and uncertainty, the four-day festival is scheduled to return to the Trumansburg fairgrounds in July, when the band will finally be able to celebrate the festival's 30th year.

'People Dance'

Puryear and fellow co-founder and multi-instrumentalist Tara Nevins first connected more than three decades ago while playing old-time fiddle music at festivals throughout New York state and the southern US. The two started writing songs and playing with friends, and the group evolved into Donna the Buffalo in 1989. The band traveled extensively to folk festivals where they were exposed to a variety of traditional music styles,

including Creole, Cajun, and zydeco music. Those influences are apparent in their sound, which also draws on country, rock, and bluegrass, a mingling of styles Nevins calls "about as Americana as you can get."

And their high-energy performances never fail to make people move — something that came as a bit of a surprise at first, says Nevins, who performs on vocals, guitar, fiddle, accordion, and washboard. "When we first started as a band, we had no idea what anybody was going to do when they heard our music. For some reason, people dance."

While they're known as a "dance band," Nevins says it's more than their rhythms that engages their fans. Their songwriting draws on themes of social consciousness, community and the power of the human spirit, and Nevins says their audience can often sing back their songs word for

word. For example, on "I Love My Tribe," an ode to community from the band's 2018 album *Dance in the Street*, Nevins sings, "I put my faith in those I believe / Yeah I believe in the love of a friend." Or on "All Aboard," off 2013's *Tonight, Tomorrow and Yesterday*, Puryear sings of the hope that emerges from offering compassion to others:

*We are completely sure
There's no way to keep
the future down
With a message of love
That resonates with
the living of life
And the life of the living
What we're looking for
is there for the giving.*

The band's music has always been about connectivity, which is evident in their songwriting and raucous live performances. Members of The Herd

follow the band around to an extended network of festivals (including additional GrassRoots Festival events in Pittsboro, North Carolina, and Virginia Key, Florida), in the tradition of fan networks of bands like Phish and The Grateful Dead. Many who have followed the band for years say the connections they've formed with fellow members of The Herd have developed into lifelong friendships and even committed partnerships.

Fans say this connection is more vital than ever now, as they slowly emerge from the collective trauma and isolation of the past few years. Seventy-two-year-old Paul Roberge, a North Carolina linguistics professor, is a 19-year fan along with his daughter Maggie, 32. Roberge recalls bonding with his daughter over the band after she swiped his CD as a 12-year-old. The two started traveling together to see their shows, and would

eventually make lifelong friends through The Herd. Roberge credits those strong relationships between Herd members for pulling the community through the bleakness of COVID-19. "The void that was created will be healed," Roberge says. "There's a lot of satisfaction and reassurance that our friendships have held together in spite of the interruption."

Herd member Africa Johnson-Jacob even credits Donna the Buffalo with bringing her together with the man she would eventually marry. The Florida resident saw Donna the Buffalo for the first time on the couple's first date about 10 years ago. She remembers being blown away by the band, whom her now-husband had been following for decades, during their performance at a festival in St. Petersburg.

"Let me tell you, I was in awe," says Johnson-Jacob, 50. "I had never heard this kind of music — the fiddle,

Members of The Herd, Donna the Buffalo's self-organized fan group, dance at the New York GrassRoots Festival in 2019.

PHOTOS BY CASEY MARTIN

Donna the Buffalo performs to a scaled-back crowd in Trumansburg in 2021 after COVID-19 forced the band to cancel its GrassRoots Festival two years in a row. The festival will return in full force to celebrate its 30th anniversary in July.

the violin, the washboard, it was just unbelievable.”

Johnson-Jacob says she considers herself to be a bigger fan of the band than her now-husband, Art, 61. She calls their live performances a spiritual experience, saying they allow for intimacy with the band and fellow fans and a way to purge her stress and anxiety. But when COVID halted live performances in 2020, that outlet was suddenly gone, and Johnson-Jacob fell into a depression.

“When we go see Donna the Buffalo, it almost brings us back to the roots of the spiritual connection. It’s like going to Mass, to the pastor, you connect back with God,” she says. “When we didn’t have that, we had conflict in our home ... my husband kept saying, ‘Oh my God, we need our medicine.’ ... The root of the problem was we were missing our music.”

The couple stayed connected to the band and their Herd family throughout the pandemic, watching several livestreamed performances online.

Nevins recalls those online sessions, which she said lifted some of the heaviness the community was feeling. “People were so excited,” she says. “They wanted to reach through the phone, and we just kind of wanted to reach out to each other.”

In 2021, the band was able to organize scaled-back summer concert events with limited lineups and socially distanced seating, including at their Shakori Hills GrassRoots festival site in North Carolina.

That first live show was “really profound,” Nevins says. “It just felt like we were brushing the dust and the rocks off and climbing out of this rubble, and then we found each other again, like, ‘Oh yeah, you’re still out there! There you are.’”

Feeling Free

Even though Donna the Buffalo maintains a busy touring schedule, their main GrassRoots Festival in Trumansburg is a yearly highlight. And this year’s 30th anniversary celebration will be a much

anticipated homecoming for fans after the pandemic uprooted their beloved tradition.

This year’s performers include The Infamous Stringdusters, Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives, Peter Rowan’s Free Mexican Airforce with Los Texmaniacs, Keith Secola, and more. The lineup always spans a wide variety of traditions, including gospel, Navajo, and zydeco, and features a hefty slate of national touring acts and local and regional bands.

“Forming relationships with so many different musicians from different cultures ... that in itself is one big moment of amazing community, of people of all different kinds, from different cultures all sort of coming together,” Nevins says.

Many of the festival’s core group of musicians return annually, explains Rosie Puryear, Jeb’s niece, who’s also part of the festival’s booking team. Rosie has been involved with festival organizing in some capacity since she started as a 13-year-old office volunteer during

the second annual GrassRoots festival in 1992. After she graduated from college in 2002, she started working at the festival full time.

“Nothing is off the table,” Rosie says, when it comes to the type of bands on stage. The festival centers around roots music, highlighting bands like Toots and the Maytals, Valerie June, Railroad Earth, The Del McCoury Band, Steve Earle, Drive-by Truckers, Patty Griffin, Indigo Girls, and Lake Street Dive. Other bands, like Silversun Pickups and Giant Panda Guerilla Dub Squad, have fallen well outside the genre.

The festival is designed to promote a freeing, family atmosphere, Rosie continues, avoiding commercial sponsorships and attracting attendees of all ages. Organizers shy away from VIP sections, barricades between the stage and audience, and extensive backstage setups.

“One of the results of that is that the bands have an amazing rapport with the audience,” she says. “It’s very interactive. The audience can walk right up to the stage. Bands

often tell us it’s one of their favorite places to play, because the audience is just amazing.”

A dedicated dance tent keeps the energy high throughout the four-day festival, but dancing is an integral part of the audience’s participation at every stage. And on Saturday night around midnight, festival mainstays Preston Frank & His Zydeco Family Band start their traditional Cajun and zydeco party that keeps people moving until sunrise.

“This is not a festival where people bring their lawn chairs and line them up in front of the stage and sit down and watch a band,” Rosie says. “This is a festival where everyone is on their feet.”

Nilu Jimenez-Ross, a 43-year-old Herd member who loves to dance close to the stage, describes the experience as “this alternating current of energy that goes between the band and the audience.” She continues, “They see you getting into it, and it makes them play harder, and it goes around and around. It’s just pure bliss.”

Now, as Donna the Buffalo begins

to tour again and festivals return in full swing, Nevins calls the experience both joyful and surreal. “It feels great to see everyone again. It feels great to be doing this again, but I think there’s an emotional fatigue of sorts, or some sort of low-grade depression that everyone’s shedding.”

Likewise, the GrassRoots team is hopeful that this year’s festival will be a much-needed opportunity for connection and healing after two years that have left people profoundly changed.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so excited for the festival,” says Rosie. “I get excited for the festival every year, I get this energy build happening, especially in the spring, but this year feels different. It’s so much more special, sacred.”

She continues, “It will be a homecoming ... I keep picturing being there — standing there, walking around, seeing everybody, hearing the music from the stages — and it seems like a dream. I keep picturing the way it’s going to feel to be there again, and it’s almost too good to be true.” ■

Donna the Buffalo performs at the GrassRoots Festival in 2016



Participants practice their musical skills at 2019's Culture Camp, a series of music and dance workshops that precede the annual Finger Lakes GrassRoots Festival of Music and Dance.

