



Marin Independent Journal

Duo finds an audience and each other in the music of Johnny Cash and June Carter

September 26, 2019 - By PAUL LIBERATORE | p.liberatore@comcast.net | IJ correspondent



Danny Uzilevsky and Essence Goldman were on stage at Sweetwater Music Hall in Mill Valley recently shooting a promotional video for a Johnny Cash-June Carter tribute show they're developing called "Johnny & June Forever: The Greatest Love Story Ever Sung."

Coincidentally, Madison Flach, Sweetwater's general manager and special events coordinator, had been searching for a live music act that she could pair with the Mill Valley Film Festival screening of the new documentary "The Gift: The Journey of Johnny Cash."

When she overheard these two local musicians twining voices on "Ring of Fire," "I Walk the Line," "Folsom Prison Blues" and other classic Johnny Cash songs, she knew she'd found what she was looking for right in her own backyard.

"I thought it was kind of serendipitous," she says. "We looked at some national acts for the show, but we thought it was awesome that these two are local. They're super charismatic with each other on stage. And they sounded great. We loved them, so we asked if they were available."

They certainly were. As a matter of fact, the duo will be premiering their "Johnny & June Forever" show at Sweetwater on Oct. 4 after the Sequoia Theater screening of the Cash documentary.

"This whole thing popped up very much without us trying," Goldman says. "It fell right out of the sky."

Although they had been working in the same Marin-San Francisco musical circles for years, they hadn't really connected until Goldman, who goes by her first name, Essence, in her professional career, went into Uzilevsky's Allegiant Records studio in San Anselmo in 2018 to begin recording a new album of her original country songs backed by Uzilevsky's roots rock band, Koolerator.



"The spark of our collaboration occurred during the recording of that album," she recalls, sitting across from her new singing and songwriting partner on a leather coach in the studio where it all began. "It was a leap of faith. I'd never recorded a record with a live band before. But I was moved by the way Danny played 'Father's Daughter,' a song I wrote for my dad. I was floored. It stole my breath."

Rehearsing for a Hank Williams tribute show at Sweetwater with a cast of other local musicians, the pair discovered that, like Johnny and June, they had something going for them vocally and energetically.

"That was the first time we really started singing," he remembers, sitting in his studio's control room, a big black acoustic guitar in his lap. "I came over to her house to rehearse and we just started harmonizing. I have a pretty low voice, she has a pretty high voice and we started meeting somewhere in the middle."

Along the way, they wrote a killer country duet, "Quit You," that will be on Goldman's upcoming album. With its ear candy hook and airtight harmonies, it sounds like it could be a hit for any number of country duos.



"We wrote that song, and once we got started, we got the feel of where we're going," she says. "And it just kept going."

Performing at the Papermill Creek Saloon in Forest Knolls and other local clubs, they added a humorous Loretta Lynn-Conway Twitty duet, "You're the Reason Our Kids Are Ugly" to their growing repertoire of Hank Williams, Johnny Cash and original tunes. After a set one night at San Francisco's El Rio, a longtime Mission Street bar and club, a fan in the audience presented them with a pen and ink sketch he'd drawn of them as Johnny Cash and June Carter, writing "Johnny and June together again."

"He was the first of a whole slew of people who made that comparison," Uzilevsky says.

"Whenever we would play out, people would say, 'You're the reincarnated Johnny and June,'" Goldman adds.

Same sensibility

They don't look exactly like Johnny and June, but they share the same rockabilly sensibilities and style. On the day of this interview, they were both wearing blue jeans, matching western belts and buckles, and pointy-toe, fence-climber cowboy boots. Her long dark hair fell over her shoulders in a cascade of country girl curls, and he rocked a classic pompadour that would look right at home in the Grand Ole Opry.

As these things go, Uzilevsky is more experienced and qualified than most to play and sing the Johnny Cash oeuvre. For nearly 20 years, he was lead guitarist and music director for his late father, artist and musician Marcus Uzilevsky, a Marin singer, songwriter and guitarist who performed a Johnny Cash tribute act, calling himself Rusty Evans. In a nod to his dad, who died in 2015, Uzilevsky sometimes goes by the stage name Danny Evans.

"After my dad's thing ended, I was very relieved to be done with that," he confesses. "But, you know, I don't think I would have pursued anything like this if it was just about Johnny Cash. Having a June to bounce off of makes all the difference."

Feeling that they may have inadvertently hit on a hot concept, Goldman floated the idea of a Johnny and June act to her manager, thinking it could land them lucrative gigs at casinos and theaters. Her manager agreed, showing some videos fans had posted to an East Coast booking agent, who was so impressed that he asked for a professional video he could use to promote their fledgling act.



That's what they were shooting at Sweetwater when they were discovered and booked to be part of the Mill Valley Film Festival concert series. And, in January, they'll perform as Johnny and June in a New York City showcase for talent buyers who book regional arts centers across the country.

Back to their Roots

In her career, the 47-year-old Goldman, a single mother of two school-age children, has made a series of solo albums, the last being 2016's "Black Wings," a heart-wrenching collection of spare Americana songs about the painful breakup of her marriage. In my IJ review, I called it "a record by a grown-up woman dealing with the kind of personal sorrow that can either ruin a person or do what it did for her — turn her into a real artist writing real songs about real life." Last year, she gained national recognition when she was featured in an NPR Tiny Desk Concert, singing songs by Bernie Dalton, a former vocal student of hers who lost his voice to ALS and died in May.

"I don't think I would have pursued anything like this if it was just about Johnny Cash. Having a June to bounce off of makes all the difference," says Danny Uzilevsky about the pair's Johnny Cash-June Carter tribute show.

At this mature point in her career, Goldman has happily found her *métier* in roots music, a genre the 50-year-old Uzilevsky has been listening to and playing all his life, saying it "just flows through my veins." One of Marin's top guitar-playing singer-songwriters, he's honed his talents in a series of local bands — Chrome Johnson, Honey Dust, Elephant Listening Project, his dad's Johnny Cash act — and now sees a chance to break out of the pack with what feels, at least at this early point, like a charmed partnership.

How charmed? The real Johnny and June had one of the most storied and tumultuous love affairs in

country music history. Uzilevsky and Goldman, though, are coy about any romantic inclinations they may have, saying only, "It's complicated."

But they can't hide how stoked they are about the music they're making together. While neither of them sees themselves doing their Johnny and June act forever, they're betting on it becoming a springboard to their ultimate goal: making a name for themselves with their own original songs.

"I feel like it's one of those situations where we make each other stronger," he says. "Neither one of us is lacking without the other, but when we get together it transcends. We make each other better. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It's inspiring."

Video Stills:

