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Chemistry brings four Babes together

It's Saturday afternoon at the KRVM studio, and Babes With Axes is getting ready for a performance on the station's Acoustic Junction show. Band members Laura Kemp and Katie Henry tune their strings together while Debbie Diedrich's eight-year-old daughter plays with an origami frog.

"I need a roadie," groans bassist T.R. Kelley, as she hoists her amplifier toward the studio. "Some strong young boy."

Roadies may still be a thing of the future for Babes With Axes, who are appearing Saturday evening at the Willamette Valley Folk Festival. But the group has excited local folk enthusiasts with its confluence of four original singer-songwriters "on the cutting edge."

They came together at one of the "First Thursday" new talent shows at the WOW Hall last December, and decided the chemistry was made to last.

"We thought it was going to be, as we have started calling it, a 'one-night stand,' but everybody in the audience was pretty psyched, and so were we, and we realized we had created something larger than ourselves," explains Debbie Diedrich, the self-described "oldest and most serious" member of the group.

"We woke up the next morning, and there was no going back," adds Laura Kemp.

"The morning after was the moment of reckoning," concludes Diedrich. "Unprotected stage presence."

Part of what makes Babes special, Diedrich says, is that all of the group's members are established solo performers, with current or imminent albums and regular local appearances. All of them write their own material, which Babes utilizes during group performances.

Despite their individuality and personal styles, Babes members have an obvious camaraderie on and off the stage, extending to good-natured raillery and an unending chain of "ax" puns.

"We have a meeting of the minds that just can't be beat, and a chemistry between our voices that is really very exciting to me," says Katie Henry.

The group met when Diedrich heard a tape of Henry and Kemp playing together and contacted them. T.R. Kelley joined as bass player - "an ax-cellent addition," puns Henry.

The group's name was Diedrich's brainchild. If it carries any Lorena-Bobbittesque allusions, the group doesn't bring them up. Group members say they like it because of its irreverence and pun potential.

"We ain't no Cosmo covers," growls Kelley.



Babes With Axes: (clockwise from bottom) T.R. Kelley, Laura Kemp, Katie Henry and Debbie Diedrich, will be performing Saturday evening at the Willamette Valley Folk Festival.

"Well, I don't know," responds Diedrich. "I think I look a lot like Farrah Fawcett, now that my hair is getting longer."

Henry says the group held an "Ax-the-songwriter" contest at its first show, triggering off a long series of "babeophilia" ideas.

"T-shirts, mugs, pot-holders, refrigerator magnets, car fresheners ..." Diedrich trails off.

"Sometimes our rehearsals consist more of talking about babeophilia potential, and chocolate, and eating cookies from the bakery where I work, than practicing," Henry confesses.

But actually, or "actually," group members say they've worked hard on their material, which is all original, and hope soon to be writing songs as a group, looking toward a cross-country tour in January 1995.

Working together gives the members performance opportunities they might not have individually, Henry says.

"It's providing, I think, all of us with the opportunity to reach more people in venues where one woman with her ax would not necessarily be invited, or welcome to play. Not that she couldn't hold that audience."

"With a choke-chain," inserts Kelley.

"- but the full ensemble opens up larger festivals," Henry finishes.

Diedrich says the group is unique in how the members work together, sharing the spotlight.

"One of the reasons it works is that it is different. I can't think of any four-woman groups where each person ... there's no lead singer, there's no back-up singers, there's no this-or-that. We're all doing the same thing and passing around the roles from time to time," she says.

Group members agree they can't envision their kind of dynamic working with a group of men.

"I've been in a lot of bands with men, and they would all be - sorry, guys - competing, turning up their volume knobs, seeing who could play faster, louder, harder, stronger," Kelley says. "With women, it's like nobody feels offended if they have to sing a one-note harmony part. It's like, whatever contributes to the feeling of the group instead of 'How can I best show off?'"

Henry agrees. "It's very stimulating and exciting to be three feet away from some woman that you love very much who's throwing herself out through a microphone."

— Ruth Rowland

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