

MUSIC

Terra firma

Portland duo create solid harmony on stage and off

BY ERIC PLEMONS

In a Northwest music scene that is best known for producing seminal punk, grunge and rock bands, folk musicians work all the harder to get their just due.

Portland queers Teri Payton and Sara Sanders make up the folk duo Terra. Earning a name for themselves touring throughout the Western United States, the women are working to add folk music to Portland's standout roster.

The pair met 10 years ago as students at the former Ricks College in Idaho. "Teri was playing guitar, and I started singing harmony," Sanders recalls. "Someone dared us to enter the talent show, so we did." During their first show ever, the piano caught fire on stage behind them. "No one heard us play," notes Sanders, "but we think we would have won."

After moving separately to the Northwest, a regular gig in Albany brought Payton from Tacoma, Wash., to Salem, where Sanders lived. They concentrated on developing new material, and in 1998 Terra (a combination of their first names) released its eponymous first recording.

They moved to Portland in 1999, intending to play in the local scene. But, like many musicians, the demands of day jobs kept them from their artistic pursuit. Terra didn't play in Portland for almost two years.

Then a couple of years ago, they started booking gigs in coffeehouses, bookstores and pubs. "Every time we play, there is somebody who is really excited to see us," Payton smiles. "There are a ton of musicians everywhere, but if you play for people and they get a chance to hear you, they'll want you back." They decided to make the CD they had wanted for so long.

The impressive *No Destination* delivers the energy and creativity of years spent waiting to record an album of its depth and richness.

From the sexy, jazzy "Heartstrings" through the quietly confessional "You Have Done Me Well," from the heart-wrenching "Treading Water" to the toe-tapping, finger-snapping "Two for the Road," this is one of those albums you want with you on a long drive.

The rich orchestration owes to a large and talented cast of musicians. "There are great people here who've been generous with their time and talents and have expressed great kindness to us in our projects," Sanders says.

Each song is unique in its feel and instrumentation, but they all carry the signatures of Terra's poignant songwriting and smooth harmonies. "Sometimes people ask if we're sisters because we blend so well," Sanders smiles. "There is a blend that can only come from related vocal chords, but we've managed to accomplish it without being related."



Teri Payton (left) and Sara Sanders' first full-length release, *No Destination*, is a classic road trip disc

Though Payton's instrument of choice is the acoustic Martin guitar given to her by a fan whose only requirement was that she continue to make music, she also plays harmonica, bass, djembe drums, piano and mandolin on *No Destination*.

"I'm really proud of the CD," Payton says. "The songs didn't have to be as elaborate as they turned out, but they'd been in my head for so long that I had to get them out in their fullness. I had the opportunity to grow these songs, and I couldn't say no."

Payton is the principal songwriter in the duo, but no song is complete without Sanders' arrangements. "I get 80 percent done, and I come to Sara for an honest opinion," she says. "She adds to it or takes away."

"It is like Teri brings in the furniture for a room, and I come in and arrange it," Sanders explains. "When I find the harmony, it becomes really exciting."

The creative process is tricky for any group of performers, but it can be made even more complex when artists are life partners as well. Adding to a certain quiet mystique, Terra's intimacy and respect for each other as people and as artists are evident on stage. They share an infectious enthusiasm for their music and performance, and their sincere enjoyment of one another is playfully aware.

"Music makes our relationship, and our relationship makes our music," Sanders says with a grin. Pretty simple.

"I write very emotionally," Payton adds. "I have a moment to sit with my guitar, and it turns into seven or eight hours."

Sanders says, "If I come home and the hall door is closed, I know she is working on a new song, and I just let her be."

Besides playing regularly around the Portland area, Payton is eager to "go on the road." But Sanders wants to put out that next album. "Teri has so much more material. We're anxious to get more out there." □

TERRA plays *Produce Row*, 201 S.E. Oak St., from 9 p.m. to midnight Aug. 7 and lesbian-owned *Touchstone Coffee House*, 7631 N.E. Glisan St., from 7 to 9 p.m. Aug. 21 for a \$5 donation.

ERIC PLEMONS is a Portland free-lance writer.

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