



FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

Local band Caitlin Jemma and The Goodness push past the string-band paradigm into the unknown

Realized non-conformism is not a revelation. Forty years ago, the punk movement built its own little utopia on a foundation of middle fingers. But what causes a movement to become a factory setting? Isn't there inherent irony in a generation of non-conformists conforming to non-conformism, especially when that generation seems hard put to define the word *irony*?

The undergraduate class of 2009 stepped bleary-eyed into a brutal job market, and in order to survive, recession grads had to get creative. Even as the economy slowly sheds its rotten skin, the need for creativity and improvisation still exists. It took one economic slump for the Gen-X idea that "college equals job equals pay equals security equals happiness" to be widely cast aside. And look at us now; we've redefined the path to joy. But in many ways, we've also slashed our proverbial noses to spite our proverbial faces. In a world where conventional desk jobs become undesirable, fear of the great unknown looms large.

For local songstress **Caitlin Jemma**, exploration and adventure are not things to fear. Her music smacks another millennial nail on the head — finding light in life's dark places. Since graduating from Humboldt State University in 2014, she's harnessed that sense of bold, risk-it-all adventurism and channeled it into her music. With the aid of her band **The Goodness**, Jemma creates swirling, mist-covered folk that reaches into the great divide and assures, "Everything will be all right."

"Something I've been thinking about lately is acceptance of yourself," she says. "Accepting all sides of your being, accepting your own darkness and pushing through that."

The refrain, "See my shadow shine," from the opening track of the band's eponymous short-play (released earlier this year), is a clear example of this sentiment. The entire EP runs like a massive turn of phrase, looping through caverns both bright and dark, but always rushing toward the light.

"It's about healing yourself from within and empowering yourself," Jemma explains. "It comes from my own self-reflection, practicing spirituality — I'm very interested in spirituality, and I feel that in my music. I'm very grateful to be inspired by music and to share that with others. Not to get too deep on you," she laughs.

Laughter is another key facet in Jemma's operation. She — along with band members Kyle McGonegle (mandolin), Megan Graham (fiddle), Michael Steinkirchner (bass) and Liat Tova Lis (banjo, vocals) — can't seem to go a full minute without bowing forward and snickering. An undercurrent of sarcasm, wit, dad jokes and *zing!* runs like a river through the band's conversation. Everything from McGonegle's "old age" (he's 29), to Tova Lis' primal lean toward playing topless, fuels the mirth.

"The house rule [for practice] is we just start drinking and go until Liat takes her shirt off," McGonegle jabs.

Of course, all jokes aside, the band's practices are productive affairs. When they drop the jokes and get to playing, magical crops rise from the soil. At first glance, the group's sound is everything you'd expect from a five-piece string band — thunk-ditty-thunk, etc. But there's something about it that strays from brown — a golden tinge of mythology, perhaps, or a fiery sense of timeless continuum found more often in classic rock.

Jemma's voice has been described as Dolly Parton-esque, and that's fair enough, but far too obvious, especially for Jemma's tastes. She doesn't much care for the comparison. Try to imagine Stevie Nicks and Loretta Lynn singing in perfect unison and you'll be closer to the truth. She has the sort of vocal range seen often in the genre these days — with artists like Alela Diane and Sera Cahoone pressing the membranes of folk and rock together.

In a time when string-band music has largely passed its peak, innovation is ever important. The band says they agree with the sentiment that old-time and bluegrass is difficult to market; it's all been done before. The band strives to set itself apart.

"We play music with string-band instruments," Graham says. "But we definitely aren't just a straight-up string band."

"You can't just make it with an old-timey sound anymore," McGonegle adds. "You need to carve your way; to bring something interesting to people, it has to be something that's a little more interesting in a different way."

And after all, isn't carving one's place the point? Whether or not you reject the idea that happiness can be attained through internal and external exploration, all anyone really wants is to leave a lasting impression. Caitlin Jemma and The Goodness are etching their mark in a post-desk world, and non-conformism never sounded sweeter.

Caitlin Jemma and The Goodness play 3:45 pm Sunday, Aug. 23, at Festival of Eugene's WildCraft Cider Works Stage, and they join the Rainbow Girls 9:30 pm Friday, Aug. 28, at Sam Bond's. For more information, visit caitlinjemma.com.

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