



No fish-eye lens was employed in the taking of this photo: Maria in the Shower's music actually bends space and time.

## Maria resists modern age

Something's missing from *The Hidden Sayings of Maria in the Shower*, and it's you.

Now, this might not be immediately apparent from listening to the latest from the East Vancouver roots quartet, which is not so much a pretty good record as it is a really great radio station. Imagine a broadcasting facility that's not afraid to segue from jump-jiving rockabilly swing to ancient-sounding Appalachian ballads to Parisian café music to kid-friendly lullabies, and you'll start to get a sense of Maria in the Shower's range. But what you might not know is that all of these songs have been road-tested through hundreds of shows, not to mention the occasional impromptu appearance on the street.

"What we do," says accordion- and trumpet-player Jack Garton, on the line from his East Van home, "is only half the equation. We bring it so far, and then the audience helps to bring it to new places each time."

It's a far cry, he adds, from the usual singer-songwriter process. "Our music is developed because of the way people respond to it. I wouldn't want to craft something and spend hours in a studio making something and then go, 'Okay, here it is, world. Come and approach us in our vision.' We kind of have ideas for songs that are quite vague often, and then we sort of see what works as we go."

Busking—especially as a duo with bassist Brendon Hartley—is a particularly fruitful proving ground, Garton goes on to explain.

"When we're out on the street and we're playing songs for people passing by, we kind of just see which songs, and which parts of songs, actually grab people—people who are not necessarily there to see us. Those

things that make people turn their heads, we sort of take note of them. It's like a little mental checklist: 'Okay, that's really working.'"

Asked for an example, Garton cites what's become a highlight of nearly every Maria in the Shower show: the point at which, having worked the crowd up to a frenzy, he perches on top of Hartley's upright bass while playing accordion and trumpet simultaneously.

"Things like that are just visual elements, not sonic elements, but they add dramatic intensity to whatever we're doing,"

he adds. "So then when it comes time to arrange a song for performance, we'll place those elements that really work in strategic locations. It's almost like we're making a plan of attack for our onslaught on the audience—although it's much more peaceful than that! But we kind of have to say, 'Okay, we're going to deploy these forces in this location and that location.' We're really performance-oriented, in a way—although each individual song may change in structure on any night."

If you're getting the idea that the members of Maria in the Shower possess an unusually deep set of skills, you'd be right. The band started when drama-student Garton hooked up with guitarist Martin Reisle to perform musical-theatre versions of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Orestes*. Reisle and Hartley are both visual artists as well as musicians: the former designed the elegant typeface that decorates *The Hidden Sayings*, while the latter contributed the enigmatic cover photos of a woodpecker-headed man and a moon-faced woman dancing in a snowy sagebrush-country graveyard. Hartley and drummer Todd Biffard

bring jazz training to the band, while Reisle has a degree in composition from UBC. And all of them share an interest in vaudeville, although that's only one of the reasons why their original songs sometimes seem as if they've been beamed in from a very different place and time.

"Martin in particular has some sort of innate resistance to the modern age," says Hartley, who's been listening in on another line. "He draws a lot of inspiration from folk music and art and other cultural aspects that can be well over a hundred years old."

"But we all do that, in some respects," adds Garton, picking up the thread. "It's just our honest reaction to popular culture in North America and the wider world—and I don't think we're the only people who react in this way. I think we're of our time, too, in that we have a desire and a thirst for exploration, for having real, authentic experiences as audiences and performers, as well as having a thirst for tradition."

It's all about connecting, then—with the past, with each other as musicians, and with a greater community that embraces both the audience and other like-minded artists. And for an example of all three, check out this weekend's release party for *The Hidden Sayings* at the Waldorf Hotel.

"We're throwing everything into the cauldron for this one," says Garton, noting that Maria in the Shower will be joined by performance poet Barbara Adler's new accordion-led rock group, Fang; banjo shaman Tarran Gabriel's band, the Tailor; and a wild assortment of magicians, burlesque dancers, DJs, circus performers, and psychics.

"There's going to be something for everyone," he adds. "It's truly a festival." ♦

Maria in the Shower plays the Waldorf Hotel on Friday (May 20).

**Local Motion**

Alexander Varty

