



THE STAIRWELL SISTERS

The Stairwell Sisters

Get Off Your Money

Produced by Lloyd Maines

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Producer Lloyd Maines recalls hearing The Stairwell Sisters for the first time: “I happened upon this tribe of women musicians, playing old-time string music, with the power and excitement of a great rock band.”

Tribe of women indeed. Evie Ladin explains what holds sway with the sisters, themes similarly found in one of their early influences, Hazel Dickens & Alice Gerrard: “not exactly the sweet and tender ladies, but the stand up for yourself and face the world kind of women.”

Which is exactly the kind of women that make up The Stairwell Sisters. Evie, Stephanie Prausnitz, Lisa Berman, Martha Hawthorne, and Sue Sandlin are career women, organizers, activists and mamas; making ends meet working and living in San Francisco. They also happen to crank out acoustic, old-time music with a punk-rock intensity. Somehow, between raising children, working and releasing records, they’ve taken their band to some rather well-regarded places – appearing on A Prairie Home Companion, festival stages from Lincoln Center (NYC) and Hardly Strictly Bluegrass (SF) to Celtic Connections (UK), and many points in between.

Their third release *Get Off Your Money*, produced by Maines and out May 12, covers substantial ground as well. There are fiddle tunes crafted decades ago from Alabama to Scotland, and from points unknown. There are old songs of trains, boats and possums. One song is translated from Swahili, an all-too familiar story learned from a street musician in Tanzania. There are new songs too – original songs of trial and work, loss and love, and all-night parties. The women run all of it through the “Sister Mill.” Regardless from which era or continent the songs have traveled, The Stairwell Sisters make such heartfelt and skillfully played music that boundaries dissolve beneath the chugging force of old-time fiddle and banjo, the whomp of bass and guitar, the grit of the slide guitar, and the tight, closely interwoven harmonies.

The Stairwell Sisters come from varied musical backgrounds, some from acoustic traditions, others through amped-up rock and roll. Sue Sandlin says hearing Flatt and Scruggs brought her back to the country music her family loved, “It was akin to the hair raising excitement I felt the first time I heard The Clash as a teenager.” The Sisters are all about bringing that excitement to the stage. Lauded for infectious shows that combine buckdancing with balladry and sass, these women unfailingly play their instruments hell-bent to drive the music.

The driving tune “Kentucky Winder,” leads off the album with a crooked jump in the beat that fiddler Stephanie Prausnitz says, “really wallops the punch.” Stephanie also brought the mischievous title song *Get Off Your Money* to the group, having found it on a recording of old Alabama Fiddlers. Its whimsical happiness is the essence of what makes playing together so much fun.

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The Stairwell Sisters [continued]

Lisa explains the communal lure of the genre. “You can be anywhere, among friends or strangers, and jump right in - the living room, the kitchen, the woods, even a demonstration. No electrical outlets needed. It’s an ever-changing music, grounded in a strong tradition.”

Evie, who grew up clogging and playing banjo in the unlikely locale of suburban New Jersey, elaborates why old-time music is timeless. “People have always sung of their struggles, with work, love, the forces of nature. Coal mining songs, union songs, not too much has changed when you consider the common person. Either way, it’s about enduring and working for a decent life.”

Some of the original songs on *Get Off Your Money* have these socio-political struggles in mind. The imagery of “David and Goliath” inspired Sue to pay homage to the “generations of young people who stand up with incredible courage against unbelievable instruments of power.” The first line of “Shuffle and Shine” jumped into her head after seeing men in her neighborhood gathered, looking for day labor— “Hey there captain / give me a sign /sure could use a spot on your line.”

Martha’s job as a public health nurse and union activist shaped “Who’s To Blame.” “I place the blame for addiction and homelessness not on personal failure, but on a system that puts profit before people,” she says. “I tried to end the song on a hopeful note - we can find love and comfort despite the odds stacked against us.”

Stephanie found the Swahili song “Selina” in Tanzania. A street musician - a one-man show on a two-string fiddle - wrote this original, which everyone around the village quickly grew to love. “I was struck by the universality of the message, and how similar it was to the old time and bluegrass songs we sing, as well as the rock songs we all grew up hearing,” says Stephanie. “Skipping school, getting pregnant, snubbing authority; laying with the dogs and picking up fleas.”

Lisa, who originally founded the group with Sue, practicing old-timey harmony singing in the stairwell of their workplace, brought the funky “Hangman Tree” to the Sister Mill. Lisa recounts that Lloyd Maines was enchanted with the song – “He kept saying how ‘trabble’ it was, and how ‘trabble’ we are. I finally had to ask him what does ‘trabble’ mean?! He’s from Texas you know. ‘TRIBAL, TRIBAL!’ he said, reshaping his accent.”

Lloyd Maines has it right. The Stairwell Sisters are tribal; laying down that all-gal teardown wherever they go. *Get Off Your Money* carries the spirit and message of the urban evolution of country string band music.

