University of Florida Performing Arts

presents

Sister Hazel

Friday, September 21, 2012, 7:30 p.m.

Phillips Center

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About Sister Hazel

Sister Hazel’s creative train keeps rolling! Last year’s well-received album Release reached the band’s highest ever spot (No. 37) on the Billboard Album Charts, topping their platinum disc Somewhere More Familiar. They are keeping the momentum going with Heartland Highway (Oct., 2010, Rock Ridge Music), marking the band’s quickest album-to-album turnaround in their 15-plus-year career.


“All of us like a lot of different music,” Trojanowski said, “but we have a vibe together.” A vibe that helps create the Sister Hazel signature mix of Southern-pop hooks and country-rock harmonies.

“There are a lot of moments that have never been in Sister Hazel songs before,” Newell said. “We strive to give our audience something different each time.”

The group’s eighth full-length album, Heartland Highway reflects a rootsy journey for the band and listeners. Additionally, the album is a collection the group agrees is their most diverse-sounding disc. Beres describes the album as “American road trip music” while Copeland suggests, “it’s one of those discs you can put on and listen to front to back.”

The disc ebbs and flows between rockin’ tracks (Block’s Great Escape and Copeland’s She’s Got A Hold On Me and Where You’re Going) and more poignant numbers (Newell’s Far Away and Block’s Saddest Song [Not Coming Home]).

Beres’ Lessons in Love, Hope, and Faith song trilogy, which closes the disc, is both ambitious and down-to-earth. Each song is about a woman in his life who taught him important lessons: his wife (The Road), his daughter (Snow-Globe World) and his mother (Behind the Sun).

Each one has a slightly different sound (country, roots rock and arena rock) but flow together musically — a fitting encapsulation of the record’s varied but organic sound.

Heartland Highway maintained, and refined, Release’s recording process. For this 12-track disc, Block, Copeland, Newell and Beres contributed a trio of tunes, for which they served as producers.

“Everyone’s really involved in the arrangement process,” Newell said. “But the songwriter is the person who decides what road we’re going to go down.”

Trojanowski reveals that Far Away really fell into place after he developed the chorus drum part, while Newell notes that Copeland’s tune She’s Got A Hold On Me had a more country vibe initially but wound up with a heavier guitar groove to it.

Copeland, meanwhile, handed over the reins for his tune Let The Fire Burn to Block after he asked to be the lead singer for the song. “I felt honored,” Copeland said, “that it was one of those songs that Ken connected with enough to want to sing.”
Block feels the band’s experience factors into this sense of camaraderie. “We know that this isn’t the last album Sister Hazel is going to make so we don’t hold on so tightly to things. It’s really liberating to know that we are all in this together,” he said.

The group gathered for pre-production at the Gainesville rehearsal studio used in past years and then headed to Nashville. Additional recording took place at Newell’s home studio while Copeland and Block did their vocals in Gainesville, at their favorite Best Western (also used on Release) and a condo at nearby Crescent Beach.

The band continued their collaboration with Nashville-based engineer Chip Matthews, whom they consider something of a sixth member of the band. “His dedication to our project was incredible,” Block said.

The band’s collaborative nature enabled them to utilize the expertise of Nashville guitar aces Pat Buchanan and Tom Bukovac while welcoming back old pal harmonica player Rob Peck, who played on their first album.

Family — both blood and band, figures prominently in the Sister Hazel world. Newell, the one band member who isn’t a family man, asserts that, “Family has always been first in this band and we finally have found the balance to make it all work.”

One of Block and Copeland’s favorite parts during this recording experience was when they recorded vocals at Crescent Beach while re-living childhood memories, surfing, singing and spending time with their families.

The band hits the road regularly, doing around 100 dates annually, but they still find other avenues to maintain close ties to their fans. “The only way we can keep doing what we are doing is having our fans continue to connect and support us,” Copeland said.

For example, the band’s Rock Boat excursion, the world’s largest floating music festival, recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

Just as popular is their annual Hazelnut Hang (“Hazelnuts” being the name for the group’s ardent fans) at The Windjammer on South Carolina’s Isle of Palms. Among this year’s highlights was the group’s “Triple Crow” set where they covered tunes by Sheryl Crow, the Counting Crows and the Black Crowes.

The band embraces electronic social networking to reach their considerably large fan-base. Their Twitter followers are fast approaching the 1 million mark, and last year they did several unique fan-centric events.
One event allowed fans to call a special cell phone number to talk to one of the guys. Another showcased a set of podcasts hosted by each of the band members.

It’s not surprising the group, named after the Gainesville nun Sister Hazel Williams, is deeply committed to charitable work. Among their many involvements is Lyrics For Life, a charity they started to raise money for pediatric cancer; a cause especially close to Block who lost his brother to cancer when he was a teenager.

After all their years together, the band is feeling like they’re reaching new milestones with *Heartland Highway*. “We are all in groove. We have all things rolling along,” Block said. Newell seconded that assertion, “I feel like we are stepping into our heyday,” he said.

Band website: www.sisterhazel.com
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