

MUSIC PEOPLE | Harmonious Wail

The Cooperstown Concert Series has brought classy entertainment to the area for decades. The 42nd season will include a performance by renowned gypsy jazz group Harmonious Wail on Saturday, Nov. 12, at the Otesaga Hotel at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$15 for senior citizens, \$5 for students 13 years and older, and free for students 12 and under when accompanied by an adult.

Harmonious Wail, based in Madison, Wis., consists of **Sims Delaney-Potthoff** (mandolin), Maggie Delaney-Potthoff (lead vocals and percussion), Mark Kreitzer (guitars and vocals) and Jeff Weiss (bass).

In preparation for the performance, we spoke with Sims, the group's music director and leader, who also plays the tenor guitar and ukulele. The Chicago native, who founded the group in 1987, assured us that when Harmonious Wail perform, they aim to please: "Our dedication and devotion is to the people who choose to come to see the band; it is a guarantee that they are our focus." We also discussed the history of the group, the origins of gypsy jazz, the changing climate of the music industry, and more.

— Adam Sisenwein

O-Town Scene: How did the genre of gypsy jazz come about? How does it compare to other styles of jazz?

Sims Delaney-Potthoff: The genre is based on the legacy of this fellow named Django Reinhardt, a very gifted guitarist who played gypsy music in Paris. The story goes that one day, he is on the road and some musicians play a Louis Armstrong record for him. Django loved the music so much, he put his head in his hands and wept. So he started playing American jazz music, but with kind of a gypsy point of view.

As jazz goes, it's a pretty big word. I think one of the biggest differences is that it's guitar- and stringed-based. A lot of people have said, "Well, jazz kind of intimidates me," and I think gypsy jazz is a little more accessible to a common ear, but it definitely pulls from a bebop sensibility, with traditional jazz harmonies, chords and progressions.

OS: How do other influences help shape the sound of Harmonious Wail?

SDP: I think as an artist, you bring all your influences into your work; the end result is going to be directly influenced. I can dive into a certain type of music and listen to nothing but that for a year, and that's going to affect my playing. But if you come back and answer a question like, "Why do you like this music?" there's no real answer for that — "Because I like it, it resonates with me?" I have no idea, but I know it puts my hair on edge and I love it. So everything, from the Beatles to the Allman Brothers Band, to bluegrass; when I pick up the mandolin, all of that stuff comes to bear. At the end of the day, a good song is simply a good song, period. It depends



Contributed

Sims Delaney-Potthoff (far left) of Harmonious Wail talks with the O-Town Scene this week. The group will perform at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 12, at the Otesaga Hotel in Cooperstown.

if you put distorted guitar or a banjo behind it, that's going to define its style, but a good song is a good song.

OS: What is it like having your wife, Maggie Delaney-Potthoff, in the group?

SDP: We stayed away from that for a while, following the rule of "Don't work with your wife." She and I have two boys, and when they were younger she was busy and I was out on the road. As the time went on it just became obvious that she should be in the band. We're conscious with our band mates, not to be smarmy. We use each other's names when rehearsing or travelling with the band, so it doesn't get lovey dovey, so we've been able to be workmates. We occasionally have

slip ups and call each other honey during a rehearsal, and go "Oops, sorry about that."

There was one time where we weren't necessarily having the best time and had to perform that night. We got to the gig, and the only way to make this music happen is to put all that stuff aside and focus on the music. So we did that, and we had a great night, the music was great. Afterwards, we're wrapping cords and the dust is settling over the gig and I walked up to her and she put her finger up and said "Uh-uh, no no." We went back to where we were. We both play music, and we both respect that so much that we got over our little egotistical babbling that everybody has, put it aside for three hours and play music, and then it kind of went back to where we were. We're real with each other.

Gypsy jazz band

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OS: You teach lessons on the mandolin, guitar and ukulele. What has that been like?

SDP: I think you learn a lot by teaching. I really enjoy the relationship with my students. It comes back to me, you find yourself saying things that to clarify it, to put it into words, you have to believe in it. So it's really been a learning experience for me to be a teacher. I teach privately, the ukulele, mandolin and guitar, and I also teach classes at the university, the continuing education series.

We all teach. Maggie teaches voice, and she has got a full schedule; there are so many people who want to work with her. She's got this reputation for being just the best around. She's developed her own method, called "Maggie's Method," and a website dedicated to it (maggiesmethod.com).

It's been a nice part of our lives, to not actually just be busy in music, but actually to be helping people. It's not just, "Put your finger here," it's that energy in there, and sending airwaves out for someone to listen to.

OS: Has teaching affected your approach to Harmonious Wail?

SDP: I would have to say yes. When you teach and you watch people who work and are growing so much, the main message is to connect with the tone. Don't worry about the speed; you can work on speed, it will come. Never lose that tone, stay connected to the tone, and make the tone as deep and as big as you can. When you teach that enough and you pick up an instrument, it's going to effect your playing. So I've got to believe that I have become more toneful since I've been a teacher. Transcribing is also important: transcribe and learn solos by the masters, just listen to them and transcribe them. If you say that to somebody, turn to yourself and say, "Are you in fact doing that?" Every teacher does that. You gotta do what you say.

OS: What has your experience been being an independent musician for most of your career?

SDP: The thing of being bigger than big isn't going to help you anymore. If you write good music, travel around, bring it to your audience; it's that direct. So the fact that it's back to us, that we are our own record label, we sell most of our music on stage, and downloads.

We feel pretty good where we're at in the music business. It's kind of gone back to where we've always been. It's not chasing trying to be on the cover of Rolling Stone kind of thing, or millions of dollars. no no no. We'd be happy in the hundreds of thousands or tens of thousands. We're just real people playing real music for real people.

OS: Looking back on the career of Harmonious Wail, what stands out to you?

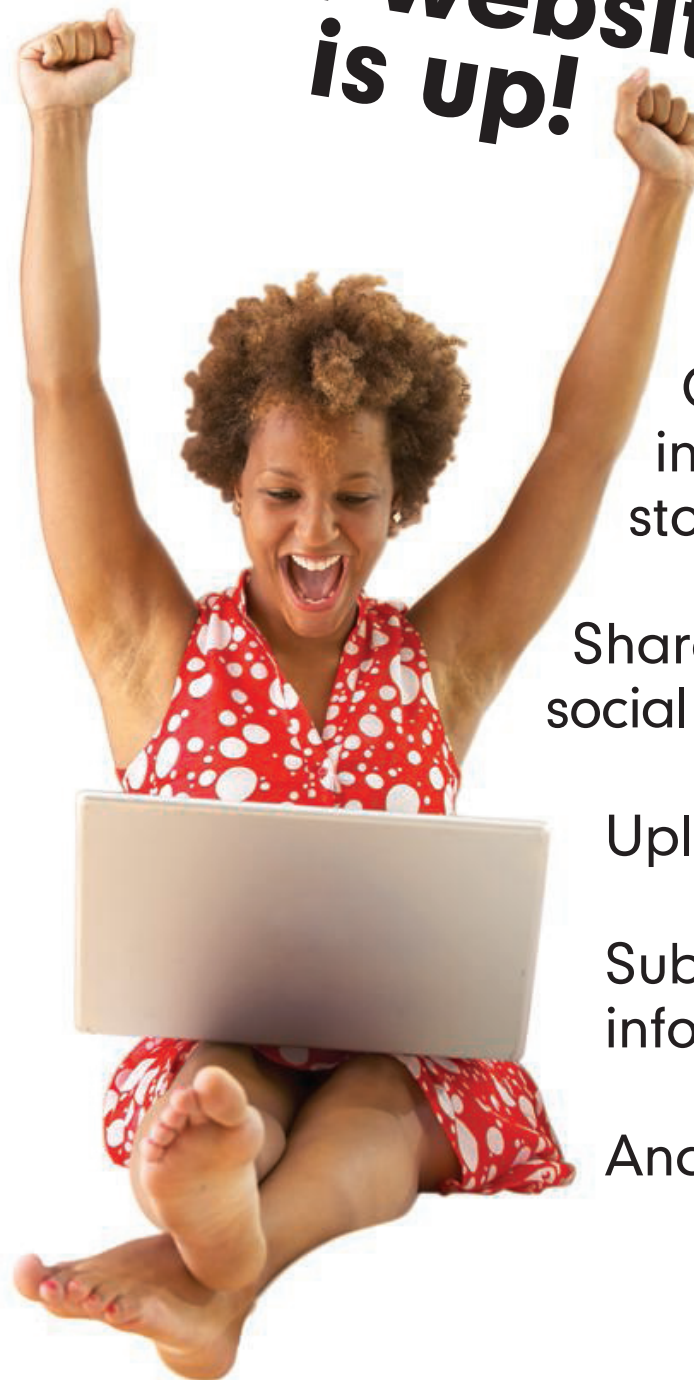
SDP: We've played in Europe a lot, and played for Stephane Grappelli [a violinist who collaborated with Django Reinhardt] once in Germany. Touring Ireland, just being in Ireland, it's such a magical place, and an opportunity, we're so grateful to have spent the time that we were there, it's just musical and magical.

There have been a lot of people in this band, and a lot of people who have helped this band, and a lot of people who have come out and listened to this band. I am just so beholden and grateful to everybody. Though there might be names like Grappelli, Jethro Burns [who introduced Sims to the music of Django Reinhardt], and Pete Seeger, who was helpful for the band, it's not about the big names, it's the people who come out and hear the music, the idea of real people playing real music for real people.

For more information on Harmonious Wail, including tour dates and streaming music, visit wail.com.

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