

Duo take jazz, one another, to heart



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

They fell in love, first with one another and then with jazz.

They were teenagers at Cincinnati's School for Creative and Performing Arts. She was born and bred. He had just moved there from New Paltz, N.Y. They were starting 11th grade.

"Andy was a hot item because he was new and cute," says Petra van Nuis.

They met in American history class. After that class they talked, and that was that.

"Our first conversation was brief, and I know it sounds silly and I was a hormonal teenager, but I felt like I knew him right away and was in love with him by the time we got to the stairwell," she says.

"I fell in love with her five minutes after we met," says Andy Brown.

He was a guitarist and saxophonist, focused firmly on the blues. She was a vocalist, focused on musical theater and dancing.

Now, these many years later, they are firmly part of the local jazz world, busy and happy and happily married.

But back to Cincinnati for a moment.

They graduated high school, and "our moms let us live together. ... Crazy, huh?" says van Nuis.

She went to the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and earned a bachelor's degree in musical theater. Brown dropped out after a month at the same school and started playing around town six nights a week with a bluesman called Cincinnati Slim.

Then Brown got hooked



ANDREW A. NELLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Petra van Nuis, left, and Andy Brown perform at Pete Miller's in Evanston. They met in 11th grade and married in 1999.

on jazz and went back to school to study saxophone. He switched to guitar and dropped out after a year — "taking the early exit program," he says — deciding to teach himself by hanging out with the local jazz musicians and listening to and transcribing classic recordings.

Van Nuis did a couple of years of musical theater and was often on tour. She didn't like being away from Brown, and while recovering from a foot injury suffered on the road, she, too, began to be drawn to jazz and "decided to do what Andy was doing and teach myself in the old-school way of sitting at the feet of local elders and also transcribing from recordings."

In 1999 they married and began performing together. Then, as do many ambitious young people of all creative stripes, they moved

to New York.

"We were there for a little more than a year and met and saw some of the best musicians in the world," Brown says. "But there just weren't enough places to play. We would meet the greatest players on the planet, and they'd be hustling around to get a Sunday brunch gig."

And so they came here in 2003, and here they have stayed.

Onstage they are exciting in the most intimate ways. Off it, they are charming and thoughtful.

They also appreciate the value of their elders.

"I don't know what it is about us, but we've always hung out with people older than us," van Nuis says. "It is an amazing thing to see and hear those of a previous generation still so vital and still growing creatively. It is so inspiring."

She speaks with deep affection of the amazing pianist-singer Judy Roberts "and all the great advice she has given me," and remembers a conversation she had with the great jazz trumpeter Bobby Lewis. (Catch him whenever you can; bobbylewis.com.)

"I told him that my favorite singer was Peggy Lee," says van Nuis, adding that Lewis recalled, "Oh, I played with her many times," and then proceeded to tell the young singer many stories.

This sort of connection with the musical past is meaningful to van Nuis and Brown. They know there are all sorts of lessons to be learned and they are eager students.

A few years ago, Brown was booked to play in a trio for Barbra Streisand's appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." "During

rehearsal, the producer tells us we have to cut (down) a song. He said, 'America can only hear a minute and 30 seconds of music,' " Brown says. "Instead of getting angry or protesting, Streisand and her pianist simply cut the song ('Make Someone Happy'). And she nailed it. They showed what it means to be consummate pros."

The couple has no plans for kids. "Between the weird hours and low pay, it just wouldn't be prudent," says van Nuis. "One of us would have to get a 'real' job, and that doesn't seem to be in the cards."

What is in the cards is more performing — and learning. "We have become specialists in older songs and we gravitate there," Brown says. "We explore music we care about, but we also have to make a

living and play what people want to hear."

That included four renditions of "In Your Easter Bonnet" at one recent Sunday brunch, but it has also compelled people to approach them and say, "I thought I hated jazz, but you guys ..."

They play frequently as a couple but just as frequently with others. (For schedules, see petrasings.com and andybrown.com. There you will also find critics praising their work: DownBeat magazine wrote that van Nuis has "a light, gorgeous, and fairly delicate voice ... a gift for melody and plenty of rhythmic confidence"; the Tribune's Howard Reich called Brown's work "superb but serenely understated.")

Sunday is a particularly busy day for both. In addition to their weekly Sunday 5-11 p.m. engagement at Pete Miller's in Evanston, they play the Riverside Arts Festival early in the day, and Brown will perform with organist Chris Foreman late night at the Green Mill.

Sunday also happens to be their 15th wedding anniversary.

The wedding was a simple affair. "Just a trip to the courthouse with our moms," van Nuis says. "Afterward, we had lunch at my mom's house, and it was raining, so we went to see the new aquarium. Music? I do remember dancing in my mom's living room to Rosemary Clooney singing 'Tenderly.'"

Any special plans?

"In classic jazz musician 'can't say 'no' to a gig' fashion, we're booked all day," says van Nuis. "It's cool, though. We'll celebrate another day."

"After Hours with Rick Kogan" airs 9-11 p.m. Sundays on WGN-AM 720.

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