

Soundtrack gives band the ultimate screen test

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By Chris Burrell, Globe Correspondent, 12/12/2003

EDGARTOWN -- For most of the past three years, they have practiced, jammed, and raised hell. Not in bars or clubs, but in a place where proper ID isn't an issue: a nursing home on Martha's Vineyard.

Actually, it's the cellar of the Long Hill assisted living residence in Edgartown, and it hardly seemed like a steppingstone to stardom. But the members of the Unbusted kept writing songs and stuck to a rehearsal schedule at the center, which is run by the mother of guitarist Jackson Sandland. They made time after day jobs of scraping paint and raking leaves. Two of them deferred college acceptances. Then the band members pulled up stakes and headed to Allston last winter to make a name for themselves in area clubs.

Finally came the breaks -- not one, but three. And all of them sprang from their Vineyard roots. Now, suddenly, the music born in a nursing home is about to be heard nationwide.

Today, moviegoers across the country who check out the latest Farrelly brothers comedy concoction, "Stuck on You," will also hear three songs by the Unbusted.

"I'm lucky to have stumbled on them," codirector Peter Farrelly said by phone from Baltimore. "They're top-notch musicians."

Farrelly, who owns a home on the Vineyard, was really just a link in a chain of good fortune.

The first and pivotal break came thanks to Danny Kortchmar, a songwriter, music producer, and session guitarist whose name shows up on liner notes for an extraordinary list of pop stars over the last three decades: James Taylor, Jackson Browne, Carole King, and Bob Dylan, among others.

Kortchmar, who now lives year-round on the island, heard about a local band with a distinctive sound. The group's power-chord rock tunes are not always catchy, but they are, at times, rich and intricate and surprising. What starts off as a melancholy ballad can spin into a pure blast. Almost two years ago, Kortchmar sought out the Unbusted on a small stage above the town hall in Vineyard Haven.

Bassist Ben Smith remembered that night. "He comes backstage afterwards and says 'That was good. I'd like to work with you guys,'" Smith recalled, still shaking his head in disbelief.

The collaboration with Kortchmar, band members said, has instilled confidence in them. "Danny is a totally incredible hook-up," said Tim Laursen, one of the quintet's three guitarists. Kortchmar has "all his knowledge and enthusiasm and a real belief that we're going to make it."

Kortchmar was drawn to the songwriting talents of lead singer and guitarist Joe Keefe.

"They're youth songs, honest and heartfelt. They sound the way people speak," said the veteran music producer. "They're not laid out like ordinary songs. They're poppy but they're constantly going places you wouldn't expect."

More than an admirer, Kortchmar not only offered to take the Unbusted into an island studio to craft a new demo CD, he strategically handed the final product to his buddy Peter Farrelly.

"I listened to it once. I listened again, and it kicked: 'Oh my God, these guys are really good,'" said Farrelly, who likes the idea of discovering new talent (he used some Pete Yorn songs for his last film, "Me, Myself & Irene").

No one is saying how much money the Unbusted is getting for "Stuck on You," but the boys have paid off their van, a four-year-old Chevy with room for 15.

The timing was perfect for their third break: their first tour. They hit the road in October for a two-week swing of East

Coast and Midwest cities with Juliana Hatfield and her ad-hoc band Some Girls.

That connection also originated on the Vineyard. Hatfield traveled to Oak Bluffs last year for a benefit concert with former Lemonheads frontman Evan Dando, and Sandland went to the show.

"After the set, I couldn't help myself. It was like a tractor beam," he said. "I walked up to her and had this fluid, great conversation with her."

A few months later, he invited Hatfield to catch the Unbusted at the Abbey Lounge in Somerville.

Like Kortchmar, Hatfield fell for the unique songwriting. "The songs were smart," she said on the phone from Somerville. "Seeing Joe play, he was really charismatic. The band had this whole energy. . . . I had to have them on tour with me."

These five musicians ranging in age from 21 to 24 embraced life on the road: 13 gigs in 14 days that included stops in Providence, New York, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and Chicago. One critic likened them to Nirvana and the Strokes, praising the full-throttle sound that kept crowds dancing.

"This is a band with three electric guitars. They make a hell of a racket," Kortchmar pointed out.

Keefe is the most expressive, his entire face turning into knots as he leans over the mike. And his voice has some range, raspy one minute and lofty the next.

The Unbusted can now play as loudly as they please. Old mattresses, clothing, and some soundproof boards installed in the cellar have lessened the likelihood that Sandland's mom will ask them to turn down the amplifier.

Ironically, some of Keefe's songs seem suited to the elderly people upstairs. "When you die, would you not like to say I did it my way?" Keefe sang at a recent rehearsal.

The lyrics are filled with nostalgia and exuberance: "I don't wanna grow up. I don't want it to end," as one song goes.

There doesn't appear to be any danger of a premature demise for the Unbusted. "We're very much at the beginning of the road," said Sandland.

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