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Sunny forecast from New Zealand

Ruby Suns is bridging the gap between world music and pop.

Ryan McPhun, the sole permanent member of New Zealand's Ruby Suns, has some advice for anyone about to embark on a summer vacation. "Pack lightly!" he stresses, having logged countless hours on international trips himself. "Money is just money, and not worth stressing about in the long run. Also, don't go skinny dipping late at night and leave valuables in the pockets of your clothes that you left on the beach."

Mr. McPhun was raised in Ventura, Calif., where he cultivated a desire to travel the world. Africa and Thailand were first on his list, followed by a fateful visit to New Zealand. He permanently resettled in Auckland and took up work as a musician, playing drums for such pop/rock groups as the Brunettes. After spending several years in the employ of others, he decided to launch his own act, the Ruby Suns, in 2004.

"I met a lot of people in New Zealand who influenced what I was listening to," he explains, "which then changed what kind of music I was making."

Mr. McPhun began molding the Ruby Suns' eclectic sound, which owes as much to California's musical legacy (most notably the Beach Boys) as to the native Maori traditions of his adopted country. Mixing pop songs with elements of Kenyan, and other African and South Pacific music, the Ruby Suns began turning heads in Auckland and abroad.

"Sea Lion," the Ruby Suns' latest album, was recorded in Mr. McPhun's own bedroom. Trombones, synthesizers, violins and guitars all combine to create a hybrid that veers between Polynesian folk and poppy electronica.

"It seems like the Maori people are born to sing," says Mr. McPhun. "It's part of their culture, and I'm a little jealous of that intrinsic musical ability [that] so many people seem to have. When you listen to traditional New Zealand music or Polynesian music in general, you hear some really amazing rhythms, melodies and voices!"

The Ruby Suns has toured America and Europe in support of their music, although Mr. McPhun finds it different than his previous travels. "It's pretty hard to be a tourist when you're touring," he admits, listing Stonehenge as one of his favorite stops in recent memory.

The band visits the District on Saturday to bring their sunny songcraft to the Black Cat.

Tapping into success.

Some musicians bring extra pairs of drumsticks on tour. Others cart around multiple guitars, in the event that one of them falls into disrepair during a performance. Jaime Pressnall, the chief percussionist for Tilly and the Wall, has something different in her luggage: a pair of Capezio tap shoes.

"I go through a pair a month," says the veteran tapper, whose energetic feet provide most of the "drumming" for her band. "Once the arches get too soft, it's really bad for your ankles. It's also unfortunate for the band, since they're about \$200 a pair."

Ms. Pressnall is a trained dancer, having taken tap lessons since childhood. After joining the ranks of Tilly and the Wall, however, she modified her moves to help shape the band's exuberant, pop-based sound. Comprised of five Nebraska-based songwriters, Tilly and the Wall craft high-spirited music that's suitable for the schoolyard playground as well as the club. Buoyed by Ms. Pressnall's tapping, the songs take on a unique energy otherwise absent in pop music.

"I still do some traditional moves," she explains of her approach, "but I'll also incorporate step dancing and stomp. If I want more of a drumbeat sound, I'll try to mimic a drum kit. I call it 'The Tilly Style' - that's the technical term."

For Tilly and the Wall's most recent album, "O," the band mates wanted to add a tough, punk rock edge to their sound. Accordingly, a stomp troop was hired for two songs. Ms. Pressnall taught a choreographed pattern to 10 dancers, who then rehearsed the steps before recording them in a high-school gymnasium. One of the resulting tracks, "Pot Kettle Black," is perhaps the fiercest thing the band has ever recorded, from its thunderous intro to the garage-rock guitar hook.

"We've been playing that one on tour," says Ms. Pressnall, "and it's been really fun."

The Ruby Suns appears at the Black Cat on Saturday.

Charting Tilly and the Wall's progress throughout the decade is easy. Just look at the band's current tour across the U.S. They've upgraded to a 14-person van, complete with an accompanying trailer to help haul instruments and merchandise. They've also added several members to their entourage, including a lighting designer, sound engineer and an auxiliary guitarist. Finally, the band now performs with a standard drummer, Craig DeMayo, who augments Ms. Pressnall's tapping and expands the group's percussive capabilities.

"We're loving it," summarizes Ms. Pressnall, as her van barrels through the Southwest on its way to another city.

Tilly and the Wall will visit the Black Cat on Saturday to headline an evening that also includes performances by the Ruby Suns and D.C.'s own Exit Clov. Music begins at 9 p.m., and tickets are \$13.

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