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## Love of old-time sound starts with ukulele

By **WAYNE BLEDSOE**, [bledsoe@knews.com](mailto:bledsoe@knews.com)  
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The members of Mad Tea Party are musical time travelers, but they have no idea where to stop. Ami Worthen, Jason Krekel and Lora Pendleton - the Asheville, N.C.-based musicians who make up Mad Tea Party - borrow from 90 years of pop music to come up with their own sound.

Old-time, rockabilly, hot jazz and, especially, 1920s-'30s pop are blended into the band's original music.

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Mad Tea Party lead vocalist/ukulele player Worthen says the group feels a kinship with the old-time music community.

"All three of us played old-time music and were inspired by it," she says. "I think it shows up in the groove and our sense of rhythm."

The group's new album, "Big Top Soda Pop," bears out the statement, but Worthen's instrument of choice points to early pop music.

"The ukulele was so popular in the 1920s," she says. "My

grandmother, and it seems like everyone's grandmother, played one. I'm not sure why it went out of favor. It's so fabulous!"

The ukulele actually found a footing in music in the United States because of the national interest in Hawaii in the teens and 1920s. The steel guitar also found its way into the mainland culture during the same time.

Worthen says she is always finding old sheet music that has ukulele chords printed above the music.

She says her interest in 1920s pop music came by way of modern revivalists the Cheap Suit Serenaders. The Serenaders, who feature comic artist and record collector Robert Crumb, began re-creating vintage music in the early 1970s.

"I started learning about them and then where this music came from," says Worthen.

She began writing songs and performing around Asheville in 2000. Krekel, who was involved in the old-time and roots music scene, began accompanying Worthen on certain dates, and the duo released two independent discs, "Flying Saucers" and "73% Post Consumer Novelty." Shortly thereafter, bassist Pendleton joined the group.

Worthen has noticed many younger artists digging into music from a much earlier era.

"It probably has something to do with modern society being somewhat unfulfilling," she says. "Modern mainstream music is just not that inspiring. When you're craving authenticity, innocence and a sense of humor, it leads you back to early 20th-century music."



Mad Tea Party digs into great-grandma's musical closet for influences. The group includes, from left, Lora Pendleton, Ami Worthen and Jason Krekel.

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However, Mad Tea Party and other groups, including the Avett Brothers and Old Crow Medicine Show, do not seek to re-create the older styles.

"I'm not a preservationist. I have friends who play and want to sound exactly like the old records, but that's not interesting to me. They play a role, and I can appreciate that, but that's not what I want to do," Worthen says. "I want to use those influences, but we hope to bring our own flavor to it. We (also) listen to The Zombies, The Hollies, Bill Haley

"What we do is different. Not a lot of people are mixing things up."

Mad Tea Party has been compared to era-defying acts Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks and the Asylum Street Spankers.

Worthen says her group has been playing to some festivals where the crowds are much larger than what the band is used to.

"We love playing festivals, and it's exciting to play for hundreds of people, but we get just as much satisfaction playing for a small crowd who are all 'present.' Our crowd tends to be really intelligent people, nonconformists, people looking for authenticity and wit. We don't have a big frat crowd."



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