

Unsigned, Sealed, Delivered

By Ali Green, Managing Editor

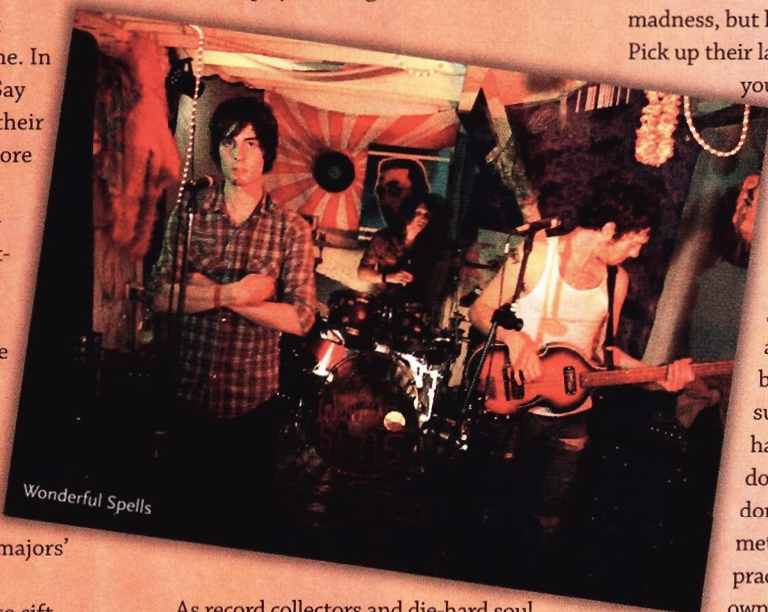
Elmoristas often complain that the market floods with material useful only for the production and storage of earwax. Major labels force-feed fluff like it's nourishment for the masses, distracting us from talent still unsupported by their bankrolls. While it may not be smooth sailing for the unrepresented, that doesn't mean they can't turn a dime. In 2005, unsigned Clap Your Hands Say Yeah sold nearly 20,000 copies of their self-titled debut, fueled by little more than word of mouth.

The talented *can* support themselves, and there's never been a better time to do so. With the advent of MySpace and a bevy of sites to post material, it's easier to promote outsider music than ever before. Nonetheless, the public still invests a certain amount of trust in a label's ability to provide quality control, but remember that talent ranks behind marketability in the majors' decision-making process.

For the diligent listener willing to sift through piles of crap to find gems, unsigned bands run rampant on the web, and at local watering holes they sell their CDs and sometimes give them away for free. Here are a few I've been turned on to:

The Sweet Divines, a New York girl-group quartet backed by J.B. Flatt & the Divine Soul Rhythm Band, vow to bring

authentic soul music to the unfortunate generation that missed the genre's heyday. Singer Jennie Wasserman and bandleader/organist J.B. Flatt cite '60s' female vocal quartet the Sweet Inspirations as an influence, but the Divines' four-part harmonies play in a league of their own.

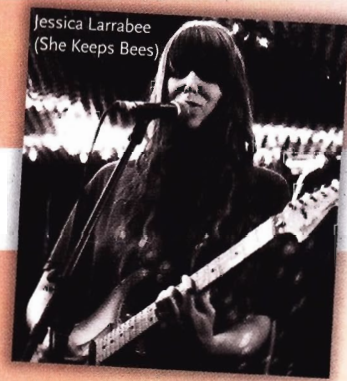


As record collectors and die-hard soul fans, Wasserman and Flatt make music they're passionate about. While it's easy to call it retro or nostalgic, Flatt explains that soul music doesn't have to live in the past. "I know for me as a writer, I write this way because these are the records that I listen to... and I still haven't heard them all...they are still very relevant to my life and a lot of

other people's lives." We haven't heard all of what the Sweet Divines have to offer, and if their *Honeythistle* EP is any indication, there's a lot more exciting soul music to come.

She Keeps Bees play evocative blues-rock, and simply speaking, they rock. The duo records at home, but they could probably record in the subway and still sound amazing.

Jessica Larrabee's emotive vocals have at once a soothing and a hard-edged



quality, a musical hybrid of Cat Power and Patti Smith. Despite classic blues, folk and soul influences, these Brooklynites aspire to sound like no one but themselves. Live, Larrabee's nervous energy borders on madness, but her prowess is jaw-dropping. Pick up their latest release, *Nests*, wherever you can find it.

The Wonderful Spells don't take themselves too seriously, but they do play seriously sweet jams. Brothers Bo and Jamie Moore and childhood friend J-Raff think of themselves as a family band, but their bio wastes no time with superfluous information: "We have rocked since birth." I don't doubt it. While Bo says the boys don't mind the do-it-yourself method (they record in their practice space and make their own cover art and posters), they

wouldn't mind a label picking up the bill and facilitating a tour beyond the Boston/New York area. Until then, they gather a following through live performances, which Bo considers the only tell between a good and bad band since in the digital age even your grandma can cut a record. Their new, still unreleased EP offers a unique, infectious kind of rock 'n' roll.

While the industry pushes out artists who get songs handed to them on a silver platter, these groups take pride in writing and recording their original material. Label contracts may be on the horizon, but as Wasserman reminds us, seductive opportunities often come with a price. "When you go to a major label, they want to change you, and we're not really willing to compromise on our vision and our sound." I hope that rings true for all, because if there's one thing these unsigned acts can't afford to lose, it's the sounds that separate them from the pack. **E**



THE SWEET DIVINES: DULCE PINZON; WONDERFUL SPELLS: BRI CORMIER; JESSICA LARRABEE: TIM WILLIAMS; WWW.TIM-WILLIAMS.NET