

TURNING UP THE FUN

Shoemaker, Phippen make laughter part of the music in Virginia Steel

BY WILLIAM FOY

LEADER-TELEGRAM STAFF

Victoria Shoemaker and Peter Phippen take music making seriously, but as they demonstrate in the two-piece band Virginia Steel, good fun goes into the art as well.

As a measure of that, they don't mind comparisons to famous twosomes such as Sonny and Cher, the Smothers Brothers and, of "Hee-Haw" fame, Buck Owens and Roy Clark, all of whom elicited laughter while they made well-loved music.

Another iconic group, Violent Femmes, also came up during a conversation with the Eau Claire-based musicians, but not because Virginia Steel sounds all that similar to the trio's brand of acoustic alt rock. Rather, in a reflection of their musical abilities, Shoemaker and Phippen were invited to perform briefly with the Femmes during their concert before about 4,000 fans Aug. 14 at Surly Brewing Festival Field in Minneapolis. Shoemaker played classical flute and Phippen played a Ken LaCosse shakuhachi (bamboo flute) as part of the boisterous Horns of Dilemma, the group's accompanying ensemble.

"The cool part about the Horns of Dilemma is that it's built up of friends and musicians that the band knows in whatever city they're playing so it's a constantly changing group of people," Shoemaker said.

Accompanying the Violent Femmes and playing covers and originals as Virginia Steel are just two examples of Shoemaker and Phippen's multi-instrumental talents. Phippen has earned nominations for Grammy, International Acoustic Music and Native American Music awards, honors he's received for his performances and recordings with traditional flutes from around the world. He also played bass for the rock band Airkraft, which was together from 1982 to 1995 and earned regional and national notice.

Shoemaker also is an accomplished flutist, earning a Bachelor of Music degree from Chicago's VanderCook College of Music, where she studied classical flute and piccolo performance. She also



Photo by Victoria Shoemaker

Victoria Shoemaker and Peter Phippen, members of the two-piece band Virginia Steel, appear backstage at the Violent Femmes concert Aug. 14 at Surly Brewing Festival Field in Minneapolis. Shoemaker and Phippen played flutes with the Horns of Dilemma, a group that accompanies the Femmes, during the show.

has worked with teachers such as Phippen as well as Tim Lane, professor of flute at UW-Eau Claire. Besides her performances, she teaches and on a variety of instruments to students of all ages at the Eau Claire Music School and at St. Joseph Catholic Schools in Boyd and Cadott. She has received nominations for the 2017 and 2018 Wisconsin Area Music Industry People's Choice Award for Best Music Teacher in Northwest Wisconsin.

Funny business

When they first formed Virginia Steel about a year ago, they got some valuable input from an audience member.

They had asked an agent to attend one of their shows, and afterward he told them, "You guys are boring as hell," Phippen recalled, smiling. "This is our first gig. And he goes, 'I can't book you anywhere.' And he started naming the rooms ..."

"You'll get booed out of these places," Shoemaker said, completing the quote.

The advice, which they ultimately appreciated, gave them something to prove. "We're both a little vindictive, both a little passive aggressive," Shoemaker said.

So they altered their approach, as Phippen described.

"We threw the stools away; we stood up," he said. "We bought all wireless everything ...

running around screaming and yelling. ... We just upped it."

"We talk to the audience more," Shoemaker added.

"Well, I yell at the audience."

As a part of making their show more interactive and spontaneous, they frequently take verbal jabs at each other — and maybe their listeners as well.

As Phippen pointed out, "We do better when the audience is real close to us because they can hear her snide comments to me — in the middle of the song." Both musicians smiled when Phippen said that, demonstrating the spirit in which the teasing is intended.

SEE STEEL PAGE 10A

If You Go

Here are some upcoming performances by Victoria Shoemaker and Peter Phippen:

- **Autumn Enchantment Equinox Concert**, 5 p.m. Friday, Sept. 20, Kinestone, S3439 Cole Bluff Lane, Fountain City. Performers are Phippen, antique, bamboo and wooden flutes; Rahbi Crawford, crystal singing bowls; Shoemaker, silver, crystal and wooden flutes; and Tiit Raid, world percussion, berimbau, kannal, frame drum and moyo drum. More information: tinyurl.com/y34oynnn.
- **Virginia Steel**, 6-9 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 5, the Brown Hut, 2525 N. 110th Ave., Chippewa Falls.
- **Virginia Steel**, 8 p.m.-midnight, Wednesday, Nov. 27, The Snout Saloon, 13 W. Central St., Chippewa Falls.
- **Sound and Stories Series**: Toil and Trouble, 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 29, Clearwater Recital Hall, Pablo Center at the Confluence, 128 Graham Ave. For this Halloween-themed Chippewa Valley Writers Guild event, Shoemaker and Phippen will be joined by musician Billy Krause and writers and storytellers Elan McCallum, Ken Szymanski, Sarah Jayne Johnson, Dan Lyksett and Deb Peterson. For tickets, which cost \$5, go to pablo-center.org.

For more information about Shoemaker and Phippen's music, go to musicofvictoria.wixsite.com/musicofvictoria, peterhippen.com, virginiasteelmusic.com, or the respective Facebook pages of Shoemaker, Phippen and Virginia Steel.

MAIN EVENTS

Rapper-writer Dessa to perform at The Metro

Dessa, a rapper, author, poet and monologist, will perform with her full band Thursday, Sept. 5, at The Metro, 201 E. Lake St.

Dessa is a rapper, singer, high school valedictorian/philosophy major, entrepreneur and ice cream flavor inspiration (Dessa's Night Drive, inspired by espressos on the road, will be available starting Nov. 7 across the Twin Cities) who contributed to the No. 1 album "Hamilton Mixtape."

Her 2018 album, the



Photo by Matthew Levine

Dessa, a rapper, author, poet, monologist and entrepreneur, will perform with her full band at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 5, at The Metro, 201 E. Lake St.

neuroscience-inspired "Chime," included songs such as "5 out of 6," which

the Chicago Tribune called "a #MeToo moment for the ages," and "Good Grief."

Her next album, recorded live with the Grammy Award-winning Minnesota Orchestra and titled "Sound the Bells: Recorded Live at Orchestra Hall," will be released Nov. 8. Dessa's performances with the Minnesota Orchestra have sold out Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall six times, and her live performance will reflect the creativity gained from the arranging she worked on with the orchestra.

NPR Music has said Dessa has built a career

"breaking the rules of rap," and Sound Opinions calls her a "force of nature."

Doors open at 7 p.m. for the show at The Metro. Tickets to the all-ages concert cost \$20 in advance and \$25 at the door and are available at tinyurl.com/yyz6fnrb.

Photographer, musician create multimedia work

HAYWARD — Craig Blacklock will present "St. Croix & Namekagon Rivers: The Enduring Gift," a multimedia presentation based on his book of photography, at 7:30 p.m. Saturday on the big screen

at The Park Center, 15791 U.S. 63.

The presentation will also feature a live performance by Stillwater, Minn.-based singer-songwriter Peter Mayer.

Advance tickets cost \$20 in advance and \$30 at the door for adults and \$5 for students 18 and younger. Tickets are available at TheParkCenter.com and Art Beat of Hayward, 15845 W. Second St.

Alma Music and Arts Festival on Sunday

ALMA — The 17 annual Alma Music and Arts Festival, with food, original art and music,

will be from 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday at Alma Beach and Recreation Area on the Mississippi River, 125 Beach Harbor Road.

Admission and on-site parking are free.

Bands performing are Patchouli, The High 48's, Left Wing Bourbon and 4 Pints Shy.

Attendees are encouraged to bring lawn chairs or beach blankets. Music is held under the big tent, and in-shade seating is available.

For more information go to almaMusicAndArtsfest.org.

From staff reports

THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT

Today

- Sounds Like Summer Concert Series: Irie SOL, Orchid Eaton, Travis Lee, 8:30-10 p.m., Phoenix Park. volumeone.org/sites/concerts.
- Clear Water Comedy Showcase Night, 8:30-10 p.m., The Plus, 208 S. Barstow St. \$7. 715-832-8844.
- Vinyl Nights: Amy Hahn and Katie Cook, 8:30-11 p.m., The Lakely, 516 Galloway St. 715-839-0601; theoxbowhotel.com.

Friday

- Davey J, 7-10 p.m., Infinity Beverages, 3460 Mall Drive.
- And Friends, various musicians, 7-10 p.m., Acoustic Cafe, 505 S. Barstow St. 715-832-9090; theacoustic.com.
- Teen Movie Fridays, for teens entering grades 7-12, 3 p.m., Altoona Public Library, 1303 Lynn Ave. Those in attendance vote on the day’s film. 715-839-5029; altoonapubliclibrary.org.
- Late Night Jazz: Angie Coyle Trio, 8:30-11:30 p.m., The Lakely, 516 Galloway St. 715-839-0601; theoxbowhotel.com.
- Erik Koskinen with Molly Maher, country-Americana, doors open at 6 p.m., The Potter’s Shed, 260 Industrial Blvd., Shell Lake. \$10; free for children younger than 14. 800-850-8880; thepottersshed.com.
- Some Kind of Nightmare, raw punk, Radical Fun Time, hard core, LOiL PRIDE, punk, 8:30 p.m., The Venue, 209 Graham Ave. \$7. 715-832-8844.



Saturday

- Book signing, meet and greet with B.J. Hollars, author of “Midwestern Strange: Hunting Monsters, Martians, and the Weird in Flyover Country,” 11 a.m.-noon, University Bookstore, 105 Garfield Ave.; tinyurl.com/y5wfm58e.
- Photographer Craig Blacklock presents “St. Croix & Namekagon Rivers: The Enduring Gift,” a multimedia presentation based on his book of photography, 7:30 p.m., on the big screen at The Park Center, 15791 U.S. 63, Hayward. Singer-songwriter Peter Mayer also will perform. \$20 in advance, \$30 at the door; Students 18 and younger \$5; ThePark-Center.com.
- 40 Fingers, ‘60s/’70s classic rock, 3-6 p.m., Gilligans, 2542 8¼ Ave., Chetek.
- The Bear Creek Band, 6-10 p.m., 17643 50th Ave., SandBar & Grill, Chippewa Falls. Free. 715-723-1266.
- Eggplant Heroes, Americana, 7-10 p.m., Acoustic Cafe, 505 S. Barstow St. 715-832-9090; theacoustic.com.
- Weekend Brunch: Josh Gallagher and Jeremy Boettcher, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., The Lakely, 516 Galloway St. 715-839-0601;

theoxbowhotel.com.

- Late Night Jazz: Jeremy Boettcher Trio, 8:30-11 p.m., The Lakely, 516 Galloway St. 715-839-0601; theoxbowhotel.com.

Sunday

- Alma Music and Arts Festival, 11 a.m.-7 p.m., food, original art, music by Patchouli, The High 48’s, Left Wing Bourbon, 4 Pints Shy, Alma Beach on the Mississippi River, 125 Beach Harbor Road; almaMusicAnd-Artsfest.org.
- Don Peachey Band, noon to 4 p.m., Sherri Land Good Tymes Bar & Ballroom, 9277 2nd St., Milladore.
- The Bear Creek Band, 1-5 p.m., Sunset Tavern, N5890 Highway 54, Black River Falls. Free. 715-284-9345.
- 40 Fingers, ‘60s/’70s classic rock, 4-8 p.m., Paradise Shores, 26364 Highway M, Holcombe.
- Weekend Brunch: Nick Seeger, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., The Lakely, 516 Galloway St. 715-839-0601; theoxbowhotel.com.

Tuesday

- Open Mic: hosted by Dylan Martinson, 7:30-11 p.m., The Plus, 208 S. Barstow St. Free. 715-832-8844.

Wednesday

- The Bear Creek Band, 5-9 p.m., Gilligan’s Tiki Bar, 2542 8¼ Ave., Chetek. Free. 715-924-3105.
- Live Jazz on The Plus patio, 7-9 p.m., The Plus, 208 S. Barstow St. 715-832-8844.

Thursday

- Dessa, rapper with her full

band, 7 p.m., The Metro, 201 E. Lake St. \$20 in advance, \$25 at the door.

- “Leopold, Soundscapes + the Spirit of Place,” lecture, given by Stan Temple, about Aldo Leopold’s fascination with natural sounds, noon-1 p.m., Blue Hills Lecture Hall (R234), UW-Eau Claire-Barron County, 1800 College Drive, Rice Lake; tinyurl.com/y59gqqwj.
- Vinyl Nights: Mariah Kewin, 8:30-11 p.m., The Lakely, 516 Galloway St. 715-839-0601; theoxbowhotel.com.

Art exhibits

- “Alicia Hash//The Mineral Movement,” pieces designed embrace the beauty of nature, Friday through Oct. 26, with reception 6:30-8:30 p.m. Friday, The Volume One Gallery, 205 N. Dewey St. Free. 715-552-0457; volumeone.org/store.
- Chippewa Valley Watercolor Artists 25th anniversary exhibit, Sept. 5-Oct. 11, with artists reception 5-7 p.m. Sept. 5, Heyde Center for the Arts, 3 S. High St., Chippewa Falls. 715-726-9000; cvca.net.
- Printmaking and drawing by Emily Arthur, Shannon Estlund, Pippin Frisbie-Calder, Karen Gustafson, Eleanor McGough, Joanne Price, Wednesday through Sept. 27, with closing reception 4:30-7 p.m. Sept. 27, Gallery 101, Kleinpell Fine Arts building, UW-River Falls. Hours: 2-7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Friday. Free. 715-425-3266 or email
- Plein Air Hudson event, featuring 22 regional artists who each created 3 paintings in 3

days, through Sunday, Seasons on St. Croix Gallery, 401 Second St., Hudson. 715-381-2906; seasonsonstcroix.com.

- “Sense of Place: THERE: Song of Myself,” through Sept. 9, Galaudet Gallery, 618 S. Farwell St. Hours: noon-8 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. 715-513-9994; galaudetgallery.wix.com/ggllc.
- Members’ Spotlight exhibition, through Sept. 8, galleries of The Phipps Center for the Arts, 109 Locust St., Hudson. Hours: 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday; noon-4:30 p.m. Sunday. 715-386-2305, ext. 103; thehipps.org.
- Paintings and mixed media by Tammy Ford, through Saturday, Mabel Tainter Center for the Arts, 205 Main St. E., Menomonie. 715-235-0001; mabeltainter.org.
- “GO Paint! Chippewa Valley,” Graham Avenue Walking Gallery, Pablo Center at the Confluence, 128 Graham Ave. Through Friday. Gallery hours: 10 a.m.-2 p.m. 715-492-0240; pablocenter.org.
- Alan Honn, glassblowing; Ann Lee, oils; Marilyn Rau, acrylic on canvas; Peggy Skold, paintings, through August, artZ Gallery, 208 Keller Ave. N., Amery. 715-268-8600; artzgallery.org.
- Fine Arts Association group show, through Sept. 6, UW-Stout’s Gallery 209, Menomonie. tinyurl.com/y4obkvf8.

Museums

- Chippewa Area History Center, 123 Allen St., Chippewa Falls. Open 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays and 9 a.m.-1 p.m. the

fourth Saturday of the month. 715-723-4399.

- Chippewa Falls Museum of Industry and Technology, 21 E. Grand Ave., Chippewa Falls. Open 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays or by appointment. \$5 adults, \$3 youth, \$1 under 12. 715-720-9206.
- Children’s Museum of Eau Claire, 220 S. Barstow St. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays with extended hours until 7 p.m. Thursdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. \$7. 715-832-5437.
- “Racing in the Chippewa Valley” exhibit on local car racing history, through Oct. 26, Chippewa Valley Museum, 1204 E. Half Moon Drive. Open 1-8 p.m. Tuesdays, 1-5 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays. \$7 adults, \$4 students and youth. Free 4 and under. 715-834-7871; cvmuseum.com.
- Russell J. Rassbach Heritage Museum and Fulton’s Workshop, 1820 Wakanda St., Menomonie. Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. \$5 adults, \$3 youth, \$1 ages 6 to 12, free 5 and under. Free on Sundays. 715-232-8685.
- Paul Bunyan Logging Camp Museum, Carson Park. Open 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and 1-4:30 p.m. Sundays. \$7 adults, \$4 children. 715-835-6200.
- Waldemar Ager Museum, 514 W. Madison St. Open 10 a.m.-2 p.m. the second and fourth Saturdays of each month and 4-6:30 p.m. on select Wednesdays or by appointment. 715-834-5204; agerhouse.org.

This girl is on fire: Maren Morris leads CMA nominations

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Maren Morris has a chance to win up to eight trophies including album of the year at the 2019 Country Music Association Awards thanks to her work as an artist, songwriter and producer.

With the success of her album “GIRL,” which Morris co-produced, the Grammy winner scored nominations like single of the year, song of the year and female vocalist of the year. The album’s title track, which Morris co-wrote, topped Billboard’s country airplay chart this year, the first time a solo female had a No. 1 hit on that chart in well over a year.

The CMAs also announced Wednesday that Dan Smyers of Dan + Shay could win up to six awards work as an artist, co-producer of their self-titled third album and as a co-writer of their crossover hit, “Speechless.” Shay Mooney of the Grammy-winning duo earned three nominations, including duo of the year.

Carrie Underwood returned to the top category, entertainer of the year, for the first time since 2016, alongside Garth Brooks, Eric Church, Chris Stapleton and last year’s winner, Keith Urban. There were no women nominated in the top category in 2018 and 2017.

The biggest song of 2019, “Old Town Road” by rapper Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus, will compete for musical event of the year, also earning a nomination for Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, who is listed as a co-producer of the No. 1 hit (“Old Town Road” samples Nine Inch Nails’ “34 Ghosts IV”).



Associated Press

This June 5 file photo shows Maren Morris at the CMT Music Awards in Nashville, Tenn.

The nomination is Cyrus’ first since his own breakout country-dance hit, “Achy Breaky Heart,” was nominated in 1992.

Brothers Osborne picked up four nominations, including two for their collaboration with Dierks Bentley on “Burning Man”; one for “All My Favorite People,” a duet with Morris; and duo of the year. Underwood could win up to four trophies, including for album of the year and female vocalist of the year.

Brooks & Dunn received their first CMA nominations since 2010: they picked up nominations for duo of the year and musical event of the year for a new version of “Brand New Man” featuring Luke Combs. The veteran duo, who released a collaborative hits album this year, have a record 14 wins for duo of the year.

Also making history this year is Jenee Fleenor, a fiddle player who is the first woman ever to be nominated for musician of the year, a category that began in 1988.

Fleenor, who has been

in Blake Shelton’s band for about six years and has played on albums for Shelton, Jon Pardi, Rascal Flatts and Terri Clark, has been playing since she was 3 and knew early on that she wanted to be a studio musician. But she never really paid attention to the gender disparity in the studio until recently.

“In the studio world, probably 99% of the time, I am the only woman,” Fleenor said. “Growing up when I wanted to be a session musician, I never told myself I can’t do that because I am a woman.”

New artist of the year nominations went to Cody Johnson, Ashley McBryde, Midland, Carly Pearce and Morgan Wallen. McBryde said after announcing the nominations on “Good Morning America” that she normally wears leather jackets to award shows, but she’s decided to dress it up this year.

“Another songwriter in town offered to loan me some of her gowns and no one is going to expect me in a gown on the red carpet,” McBryde said.

Shoemaker, Phippen make racket with Femmes

» STEEL

FROM PAGE 9A

That approach met success earlier this summer at the Northern Wisconsin State Fair’s Leinenkugel Pavilion in Chippewa Falls.

“We weren’t that close to the audience, but we were still talking to them and they were yelling at us back and having a really good time,” Shoemaker said. “But they sat and they watched like it was a performance in a theater.”

After the NWSF gig, they found the inquiries from venues picked up noticeably.

Country to rock

Their music ranges from country to the roots of rock ‘n’ roll, and they do take requests, but they try to focus on music that isn’t among the most often played selections.

“If somebody’s doing it, we go the other direction,” Phippen said.

The nature of the band allows them to vary the night-to-night performances, sometimes on an impromptu basis.

“We have a song list,” Phippen said, “and I’ll look down and I’m like, ‘I ain’t playing that song tonight. I’m not in the mood.’”

“At least at that moment,” Shoemaker interjected. “Maybe later he’ll call it up again when I’m ready for another song.”

Phippen acknowledged that puts pressure on Shoemaker, considering the varied instruments she plays: flute, saxophone, drum and guitar, and she also sings on songs such as her original material.

Typically, Phippen plays rhythm guitar, bass and sings, and he also sometimes plays flute.

Surprise appearance

Their opportunity with the Violent Femmes came through their flute-playing expertise. Brian Ritchie, the group’s bassist, also happens to be a master of the shakuhachi. They had met Ritchie when the Femmes played at Eau Claire’s State Theatre in 2017, and he returned to perform at the 2018 World Flute Society Convention, which UW-Eau Claire hosted.

“He’s just relaxed and calm,” Shoemaker said. “And you sit and talk to him, and if you didn’t know who he was, like if you met him in a grocery store, you wouldn’t think

he was the bassist for the Violent Femmes.”

“You wouldn’t know he was a rock star, which he certainly is,” Phippen said.

Initially, Shoemaker and Phippen planned just to attend the Aug. 14 concert, watching from backstage at Ritchie’s invitation and for which a fellow flutist, Bobb Fantauzzo of the Twin Cities, had been invited to join the Horns of Dilemma.

But on the day of the performance, Ritchie let Shoemaker and Phippen know they would be Horns of Dilemma members for the show.

When they got backstage beforehand, Phippen asked for specifics of what they would be playing. Ritchie took out one of his flutes and gave a quick preview, followed by these instructions: “He goes, ‘Then, when the drums start going nuts, you guys just go ape,’” Phippen said.

When Shoemaker is teaching, she can draw on her varied musical experiences, such as the Violent Femmes show, although she said she offers students a consistent message: “What I try to do as a music educator is instill in all my kids — I call my students my kids ... an appreciation for the creation of music whether they grow up to be professional musicians or not,” she said. “I want them to know what it takes to get there and be able to understand what goes into it. And then as they’re working on different skills and as they’re playing understand that while there’s a lot of hard work to be done, it can be fun as you’re working and as you’re performing.”

That’s readily apparent at Virginia Steel gigs.

“The audience can tell we’re having fun,” Shoemaker said. “They crack up at us all the time.”

To which Phippen added, “We show up, we open the door and start setting up our gear, the show has already started, the people are laughing at us.”

The good-natured verbal sparring to which he alluded may not be easy to capture in the print format of a newspaper — but that just offers another incentive to catch one of their shows.

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