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A true story worth hearing

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From time to time, I've mentioned my rule-of-three test for new CDs. The good ones get played more than once on my computer at work. The really good ones make it onto the CD player in my car and the keepers go from my desk to the car and finally to my growing and increasingly disorganized collection at home. Dave's True Story, a little known jazz/pop group from New York that performs Sunday afternoon at Rancho Nicasio, passes that test like no one ever has before.

To explain: I've got their new album, "Simple Twist of Fate," their inventive interpretations of Bob Dylan songs, where I can listen to it at the office. Their last CD, "Nature," is in my car. And one of their earlier records, which I played a lot when I first got it, is somewhere in the house. When I find it, I'll tell you what it's called. (I'm pretty sure it's "Sex Without Bodies. ")



The point is, to me and a growing baby boomer audience, Dave's True Story, featuring singer Kelly Flint and songwriter/guitarist Dave Cantor, is about the coolest, smartest, hippest band this side of Steely Dan.

As it happens, "The Nightfly," the first solo album by Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, was a seminal influence on Cantor, who studied its tasteful chord changes and drew inspiration from Fagen's literate lyrics. Cantor, once a playwright, writes similarly melodic, intelligent story songs (hence the name Dave's True Story). Not many songwriters come up with lines like "There's a tune by

Bach running through her head," or "I had breakfast with my father in a downtown luncheonette/And we sat and eyed each other with suspicion and regret."

Cantor's songs are brought to life with sensuality and understanding by Flint, a Midwestern-bred girl who grew up digging Joni Mitchell, but admits she sounds nothing like her. As Cantor's tunes have added a Caetano Veloso Brazilian sexiness, Flint strikes me as a more of a Manhattanite Astrid Gilberto.

Like me, Rancho Nicasio's Bob Brown heard a Dave's True Story CD, and was so taken with them that he booked them into his West Marin roadhouse for the first time

last year. Sunday is their return engagement. Brown, an aficionado of blues and roots music, says, "You don't have to be a jazz buff to like them. Their lyrics are clever, witty and different. I love them."

Dave's True Story came out of the New York singer-songwriter scene of the early '90s that produced Suzanne Vega and Shawn Colvin. Cantor and Flint were brought together by singer/songwriter Richard Julian, who has written songs for Norah Jones and is one of New York's most popular independent musicians. Julian believed that since Cantor had the songs and Flint had the voice, they would be a perfect match. They are, but it wasn't immediately apparent, at least not to her. "I never sang jazz or was interested in jazz," she says one morning this week from her home outside Manhattan. "When he suggested that I sing Dave's songs, I told him that I didn't like that jazzy stuff. But I got together with Dave one night and learned one of his songs, and found that it was really fun to sing that kind of a melody. But I had to be pulled into it. I had to sing them before I liked them. Then we did a festival and the audience response was so intense," she continues. "We seemed to have an instant effect on everybody. We decided to take it as a sign."

As indie musicians putting out records on their own BePop label, Dave's True Story has slowly built a cult following over the past decade and a half. They had a couple of songs in the movie "Kissing Jessica Stein" and have three more in the upcoming film "Trust the Man," starring Julianne Moore and David Duchovny. They've been included on Pottery Barn compilations and are one of those groups that are hard to define but easy to listen to once you hear them. "A lot of people get introduced to our music at dinner parties," Flint says. "The hosts will have one of our CDs on and their guests will ask, 'Who's that?'"

Six years ago, Jeff Eyrich, Flint's husband, joined them on bass, took over producing duties on their albums and handles their business affairs.

"Before Jeff came into the picture, there had been times when we said that we'd play one more gig and quit," Flint says. "It was like that when we played this gig at a really cool club in Manhattan one night. There were so many people who wanted to get in that they spilled out on the sidewalk and into the street, stopping traffic. Something like that would always happen. Now I think we're in it for good."