

Virgin Mary Pistol Grip

By Doug CloughPublished: July 8, 2015

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My son listens to rap music amongst other genres. As a parent, I have learned to not become judgmental too quickly; it only encourages my children to do the opposite of my bidding, and I have bad judgment occasionally. I have found if I listened to the words in the verses, I begin to enjoy the music on the level of authorship and then a musical level.

Last March, I had lunch in Omaha's Old Market with Battle Creek native, teacher and musician Jales Hupke and his wife Carissa. We share an affinity for verse; while I publish in papers and magazine, Jales – and his band, Virgin Mary Pistol Grip – share their words with a growing audience through songs and acoustics. Besides singing lead vocal and playing guitar, Jales authors the group's music.

And that's about right for the son of parents who derived their eldest child's name from 'Josey Wales' – as in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, a 1976 cowboy movie starring Clint Eastwood. Eastwood's influence doesn't end there; Virgin Mary Pistol Grip – another interesting bout with words – comes from another of the legend's westerns featuring a peace-maker with the Virgin Mary on the grip.

This group also features Dan Nielsen on bass, Jas Hupke on guitar, J.R. Bowen on drums, and Ben (Wil) Fletcher on the keyboard. Jas Hupke and Nielsen are also Battle Creek hometowners. "Virgin Mary Pistol Grip formed in 2012," said Hupke. "J.R. and I teach at the same school. Dan works at a jewelry store in Omaha. Jas is employed at the ethanol plant in Arthur. We'd make it back to Battle Creek to practice, but we wanted to play more."

The Hupke brothers and Nielsen played in their band 'Manna' from 2000 – 2013. Manna recorded music at The Cathouse Studios in Sioux Falls, so it was natural that the newly formed band did the same. "We decided to go there for a couple hours and, wow, we connected pretty good. During that weekend, we finished six songs.

The band bills itself as rock or alternative. "We are influenced by early 90's bands like Pearl Jam and Smashing Pumpkins," stated Hupke. "JR, our drummer, is into the Beatles, Cheap Trick, and Metallica. Wil, our key board player, is into heavy bands but also into Jay Z. When I write songs, they are about my life, my experiences. It's emotionally draining, because I put myself out there."

Their self-titled debut CD, which has 10 tracks, was released September of 2014. "I didn't want to play a show unless we had an album," said Hupke. "We can get CDs out there and people will remember us. Our CD release show was at The Slow Down in Omaha."

By the end of the summer, the band will have had 20 stops on their self-titled tour including shows in Lincoln, Omaha, Iowa City, and – this Friday – in Battle Creek for their 150th celebration.

“You can’t just play on Friday night and not do anything else,” said Hupke. “You have to be out there on the scene. You have to get to know the people who hook you up with shows. Who are the bands that a lot of people go to see? You want to do shows with those bands, be able to build a fan base with those fans.”

And no one knows that more than his wife Carissa, a graphic designer working full time at the Jewish Community Center and the band’s sixth member who spends her off-hours promoting the band. She has done the artwork for the album, posters, bumper stickers, and logos. To date, she has not missed any gigs, which allows her to show merchandise for the band in between shows.

The Hupkes have found that living in Omaha since 2004 has helped to promote the band. “Omaha is a music town; many bands come from here,” stated Jales. “We go out a lot just to see other bands. We network with people in those bands to figure out who we like, who you want to play with and to get connections.”

One of those connections led Virgin Mary Pistol Grip to find a firm to produce their first video, “Whiskey Flats,” a country-sounding tune from a band that claims little interest in the genre. The group went through the songs eight times in an abandoned Omaha taxi depot to get all the right takes. In a three-month span, they traveled to numerous locations with a local actress they met through their connections.

“The video took so long to finish since the 1959 Porsche featured in the video broke down a few times,” stated Hupke. “I won’t forget that shoot because we pushed that car for a mile on I-29.” The next video on tap is ‘Rocking Chair’, a sound reminiscent of The Cars’ Ric Ocasek. A live performance of it is on YouTube.

“We are not a dumb out-of-college band or super pretentious we-think-we’re-so-good group,” said Hupke who is 38. “We are a we’ve-been-there-we’ve-done-that band, and we have a pro-ear. I’d love to make a career out of it.”

Virgin Mary Pistol Grip has a website where you can check up on their happenings. “Our band name is one that people won’t forget,” said Hupke. “If you search for us, we are the only ones that come up. You are going to get album information, social media sites, and our web page. There’s no one else quite like us.”