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Bewitching Musician

SINGER ALEX CATON LIKES GETTING AT THE CORE OF THINGS. SHE HAS A BACKGROUND IN ARCHEOLOGY, BROAD INSTRUMENTAL SKILLS AND A PASSION FOR TRADITION, MOST EVIDENT IN HER EMBRACE OF OLD-TIME MUSIC SINCE A MOVE TO VIRGINIA.

BY NED OLDHAM • PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID DEAL

Alex Caton, willowy and blond, white skirt drifting gently in the breeze, stands outside her Charlottesville-area music studio, seeing off her noon guitar student just as her 12:30 shows up. The studio, with its reclaimed parquet floor, windows and cozy woodstove centerpiece, has an old vibe, even though her husband, Dave Contini, built it just over five years ago. There are potted plants, a record player and stacks of records, a piano, an acoustic guitar, a fiddle in its case, an upright bass, and a hodgepodge of chairs and couches for audience seating during studio shows. Stacked in an open loft above are piles of marketing merchandise, including whiskey flasks to promote Caton's well-received solo CD, 2009's *Sinners and the Saved*. The flasks are engraved with the words *Sinner Supporting Traditional Music*, and can be filled, quips Caton's musical collaborator, Pete Winne, with what he calls "singer juice."

Caton, age 35, certainly has plenty of juice in the sense of creative vitality—and its wellspring is her intelligence, broad musical roots and overseas upbringing. The daughter of a Kodak executive, she lived in England and Scotland until she was 13. She started playing the piano when she was four

and the violin when she was five, and sang in Church of England choirs. She later moved to Rochester and earned a master's degree in African Archeology from SUNY Binghamton. She then dropped her idea of getting a Ph.D. to pursue her passion for traditional music which gained momentum when she moved to Virginia about 10 years ago and started absorbing the banjo and fiddle-driven American Old-time music that tinges her recent work.

Sinners and the Saved, Caton's second record, was recorded at the vaunted Levon Helm studio in Woodstock, New York. Larry Campbell—longtime sideman to Bob Dylan and Helm—has lauded the CD as "rare and irresistible." The music is earthy and eclectic and "very influenced by the [Charlottesville] area," the singer says, adding: "It is a pretty Virginia-based record." It includes Caton originals, covers of Virginia Old-time and gospel songs, and even a cover of Led Zeppelin's country-tinged "Hot Dog."

Befitting her background, Caton embraces a wide spectrum of styles, and performs regionally in a variety of musical configurations. One night she will sing with the gypsy trio Las Gitanas, on another night with Irishman Pat Egan, and more recently she's been touring with Winne, an Old-time stylist.

At home and through the Blue Ridge Irish Music School (BRIMS), she teaches Irish and Old-time fiddle, gypsy fiddle, banjo and guitar. She also has several piano students. She traveled to Ireland with BRIMS this summer for a few weeks of workshops, performances, and a soak in pub culture. Her mother's family came from Ireland two generations back. "I used to play hundreds [of Irish songs]," says Caton. "I still teach it and play, but don't really perform it. So I got out all my old tunes." She holds up a small notebook with the titles and chords for dozens of Irish songs, cribbed in her neat, all-caps print.

For the past couple of years, though, her main focus has been the gig with Winne, touring as a duo, and also playing local shows with a fleshed out band. The paradigm works well she says, because "I play guitar, banjo, fiddle and sing, while he's versatile on banjo, guitar and harmonica." Switching up often on instrumentation, the two produce a textured musical palette, with Winne's Hank Williams-meets-Jimmy Rodgers style complementing Caton's bewitching fiddle-work and plain-spoken but heartfelt vocal phraseology that evokes Appalachian songstresses like Hazel Dickens.

Caton has said that her shift from Irish traditional music toward the Old-time music of Appalachia was like an escape from geographical and stylistic constraints to the "looseness" and openness of a musical heritage that despite (or perhaps because of) her Irish roots speaks to her. Genealogy and geography can be a double-edged sword, but in Caton's case it works. She has an "affinity" for Virginia, noting that in many ways it is like England. "The culture, some of the food, and the language are more English than up north." Of life in Louisa County she says: "We are obviously digging in. This is home."

Still, part of her essential character is to reach out, and that she intends to keep doing. Already this year, she has performed in France, visited Switzerland, sprinkled her late mother's ashes over family ground in Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, England, jammed in Ireland, studied "chest-voice singing" with Appalachian vocalist Ginny Hawker in West Virginia, and toured with Winne in the northeast.

Next year, she hopes to return to Helm's studio with Winne to lay down tracks for the next CD. Caton says the material will include more originals than *Sinners and the Saved*, and notes that her new songs "seem almost more traditional" than some tunes handed down over generations. Tradition, we say, has to come from somewhere. AlexCaton.com



NATIVES

Late and Loud

WITCH HAZEL GOES TO SEED WITH A BANG

Fall is upon us, and you know the drill: leaf piles, frosty mornings, wool sweaters, pumpkin pies. The trees have gone bare, our gardens fallow, and the encroaching signs of winter no longer can be denied. Yet it is now, just when it seems we must surrender ourselves to the cold and the dark that our native common witch hazel—*Hamamelis virginiana*—bursts into bloom arriving like a late postcard from departed summer. Its subtly fragrant, slender, fringe-like petals are a bright yellow—a confetti of color against the earth-drab backdrop of the season.

H. virginiana is a deciduous understory shrub with gently arching branches and a late-to-the-party habit. Typically, the plants begin blooming in Virginia around the end of October or in early November according to Kim Strader, assistant curator of native plants at the State Arboretum of Virginia in Boyce. "You will find them in areas along the edges of woods and along the sides of roads throughout the state," says

Strader. In a mild year, the flowers may linger for weeks.

That's all very fine and well of course—who doesn't like a lovely panorama of buttercup-colored blooms just when you're digging out the Thanksgiving gravy boat? But witch hazel is not done with its surprises. It goes to seed with a bang—or, to put it more precisely,

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a very loud "pop!" audible at some distance—as the seed pods explode, flinging the seeds as far as 25 feet. On a stroll through a hamamelis-heavy woodland on a quiet, late autumn day, says Strader, you can sometimes hear the pods popping around you.

One sure place to find witch hazel is Green Spring Gardens in Alexandria, which is part of

the Fairfax County parks system. Located, in fact, on "Witch Hazel Road," Green Spring is home to more than 150 live plants representing six different species (not all of them native) of witch hazel. Among these, *H. virginiana* is the only fall-bloomer; the others flower in mid to late winter, early harbingers of the spring to come.

H. virginiana also makes an attractive landscaping plant for your own garden. Although a slow grower, it can reach heights of 15 to 20 feet or more, and though it prefers moist soil, once established it is agreeably drought tolerant.

Even if you're not much for plants, however, and the closest you come to a walk in the woods is ordering from L.L. Bean, chances are you still have encountered witch hazel—not the plant itself, that is, but the extract of its bark, bottled up and available for sale on the shelf of your local pharmacy. Otherwise known as "hamamelis water," medicine-cabinet witch hazel is an astringent that is supposed to offer soothing, anti-inflammatory relief to minor skin irritations; as it happens, witch hazel also is the active ingredient in hemorrhoid pads.

Whether or not the plant has magical healing properties, the "witch" in witch hazel probably doesn't owe its origins to the eye-of-newt-tongue-of-frog meaning of the word. Nor was the name likely derived from a curious biological coincidence: the witch hazel leaf plays host to an aphid which, in chewing on the leaf, somehow induces that leaf to build a gall around the aphid that is shaped—get this!—remarkably like a pointy witch's hat.

The "witch" then, is no witch at all. Brenda Skarphol, curatorial horticulturist at Green Spring Gardens, offers the explanation written on the educational signage there: "The unusual name 'witch' probably refers to an Anglo-Saxon word (*wice* or *wic*)

meaning bendable (as in wicker furniture)."

Interestingly, however, the pliant forked branches of witch hazel are a traditional tool for practitioners of the art of dowsing—also known as "water witching." Which brings us full circle to *H. virginiana*, blooming right about now, somewhere in a woodland or garden near you.

—Caroline Kettlewell