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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Thanks, Sheryl — nice piece. A pleasure to edit.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Mammals headline a day of folk rock

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2 Folk, Roots, & Americana Music Festival set for July 18 in

3 Bellows Falls

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4 TEXT BODY:

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5 "Comin' down off summer / Comin' down off fall / All I

6 got's a handful of festival laminates / hangin' on my wall," sings

7 Ruth Ungar of the Mammals on her song "Coming Down Off

8 Summer" — a song she wrote about leaving the excitement of

9 festival season and returning home to the everyday routine.

10 Ungar knows the experience well, as The Mammals, the

11 dynamic five-piece folk-rock band that she leads with her

12 husband, Mike Merenda, play plenty of festivals during the warm
13 weather months.

14 One they will be playing this summer is the Folk, Roots,
15 & Americana Music Festival on Saturday, July 18, at 4 p.m. at
16 Robertson Paper Company Field, 21 Island St., in Bellows Falls.

17 The show is part of the Bandwagon Summer Series
18 presented by Next Stage Arts. The family-friendly outdoor cultural
19 performance series runs from June through September at various
20 locations in Putney, Brattleboro, Dummerston, and Bellows Falls.

21 In addition to the Mammals, who will headline the
22 event, the festival will feature singer-songwriter Michael Veitch, a
23 former Bellows Falls resident, as well as Brattleboro-based vocal
24 and string quartet Doozy Jane.

25 **Genre-blurring music**

26 The Mammals, from the Hudson Valley in New York, is a
27 longtime favorite in the area. Barry Stockwell, programming and
28 production director for Next Stage Arts, said this will be the
29 band's third time performing at one of the Bandwagon Summer
30 Series shows.

31 "We're really looking forward to bringing them back to
32 southern Vermont," he said, predicting that it will be "an amazing
33 afternoon of music."

34 Fiddle player Ungar, the daughter of singer Lyn Hardy
35 and fiddle virtuoso and composer Jay Ungar, grew up immersed
36 in the world of folk music. Merenda had played guitar and drums
37 in rock bands since high school, but when he met Ungar he was
38 inspired by her folk background and started playing banjo. In
39 2001, while living in western Massachusetts, they met Tao
40 Rodríguez-Seeger and formed the Mammals.

41 The band's genre-blurring music blends traditional folk
42 instruments (fiddle, banjo, acoustic guitar) with a fuller rock
43 rhythm section (drums, bass, and keyboards).

44 “Too folk for the rock show, and too rock for the folk
45 show” is how Ungar has typically described their sound, which
46 also leans heavily on politically charged lyrics.

47 The group began as a trio but soon added more
48 musicians and became known for energetic live performances.

49 By 2008, Rodríguez-Seeger had left the group, and
50 Merenda and Ungar continued as a duo. In 2017, they revived
51 the full band and have been performing together ever since.

52 Two new albums, four years in 53 the making

54 Last fall, The Mammals released two albums, *Touch*
55 *Grass Vol. 1* and *Touch Grass Vol. 2*, with a total of 17 songs, on
56 the same day.

57 “We would probably record that many songs for an
58 album, but pare it down and then have some bonus songs or
59 some stuff to save for later,” Merenda explained in a recent phone
60 conversation with the couple. “But these just sort of fell into two
61 nice categories of a more sunny, upbeat album, and then a more
62 contemplative, dreaming nighttime album.”

63 The project was four years in the making and recorded at
64 their home studio, which Ungar described as a “very laid-back
65 experience.”

66 The couple writes separately, and their work has always
67 straddled political and the personal themes, which is evident on
68 these two albums. *Vol. 1* focuses more on socially conscious
69 tracks, and *Vol. 2* features more reflective songs.

70 Both musicians emphasize that they now focus less on
71 issues they are against and more on what they support. As a
72 result, the albums explore themes such as friendship, kindness,
73 and community as forms of resistance.

74 “There is plenty to sing about these days, but mostly
75 instead of pointing fingers — left versus right — we are kind of
76 looking ‘up’ versus ‘down,’” said Merenda. “Which is what we’ve

77 always been singing about. But it took us a long time to kind of
78 crystallize those ideas so that they are less polarizing and more
79 universal.”

80 **Music as a vehicle for** 81 **connecting**

82 They started work on the albums during the pandemic
83 lockdown, which greatly impacted the project. During this time,
84 they gained an even deeper understanding of the importance of
85 music in bringing people together and in creating community.

86 “After going through lockdown, and it being so
87 challenging to get people together, we realized our mental health
88 as individuals and our cultural health depend on gathering,” said
89 Ungar.

90 “And music is a vehicle for gathering, and songs are a
91 vehicle for making that gathering feel connected and making
92 people feel connected to us, to each other, to themselves, to
93 history, to the person they’re sitting next to,” she said. “That is the
94 biggest mission, I think — more than focusing on a particular
95 issue that is hot in the news that day.”

96 And what better way to do that than playing at festivals?

97 “We are excited to be back at Folk, Roots, & Americana
98 festival again! We always enjoy the crowd in southern Vermont,”
99 Ungar said.

100 She and Merenda are festival coordinators for the
101 Summer Hoot, a folk roots festival in the Hudson Valley, and as
102 such, “we understand the work it takes to pull this kind of thing
103 together.”

104 “Anything produced by Next Stage is very warm and
105 welcoming for the musicians as well as the audience,” Ungar
106 said, calling it “the kind of event that builds and strengthens the
107 feeling of community.”

108 “Similar to 2024, I’m looking forward to hearing and
109 meeting the other bands and connecting with fans of all ages in a
110 relaxed atmosphere,” she said.

111 * * *

112 *Tickets are \$28 in advance, \$32 at the door. Children*
113 *under 12 are admitted for free. Audience members are*
114 *encouraged to bring blankets, chairs, and picnics. Food vendors*
115 *will be on site. Gates open at 3 p.m. For information, visit*
116 nextstagearts.org.

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