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An Hour-Plus of Watkins Family Joy

By Deborah Crooks
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Musicians, like the instruments they play, just get better with age. A certain seasoning and depth of resonance only comes from years of performance and practice. So the Watkins Family Hour, comprised of a who's-who of Los Angeles musician's musicians -- led by Nickel Creek alumni Sara and Sean Watkins -- is operating at an extraordinarily high level. They may have bluegrass roots, but the Watkinses have no genre limits, and they've attracted a like-minded cast of bandmates and guests who share deep musical reserves. All are world-renowned and a have penchant for reveling in play.

This night, with the Watkins siblings along with Fiona Apple on vocals, Sebastian Steinberg (Soul Coughing) on bass, Don Heffington (Emmylou Harris, Lone Justice to name a few) on drums and David Garza on guitar and piano (regular Benmont Tench couldn't make the run), the result was sheer excellence.

The 13-year old L.A.-based Watkins Family variety show has only recently ventured out of its Club Largo neighborhood, releasing its first recording in July and quickly attracting a national audience for its all-star cast and high-caliber output of fun, traditional, and neo-traditional music. Their turn at Berkeley's Freight & Salvage, a sold-out two-night run amid their West Coast tour, served to prove the band's buzz correct.

"We've lots of friends up here," Sean remarked about the Bay Area, before introducing the first of two local guests, cellist Tristan Clarridge. Soon after, dobro whiz

Michael Wichter, whom the Watkinses knew from their early days on the SoCal bluegrass scene, was called to the stage. ("We were bluegrass brats," Sara admitted, of their shared upbringing.) The mid-show hinge was provided by L.A.-via-North Dakota songwriter Tom Brosseau, who was both delicate and funny on his two songs, evoking Hank Williams and old-time humor as the Watkins troupe watched from the stage.

Virtuosity is the glue that holds all these ingredients together, while inclusivity is the name of the game. Everyone in the core band led at least one song apiece. Steinberg borrowed Brosseau's elegant six-string to sing a stark song of losing love to one's unconsciousness. Sean offered songs from his own and Nickel Creek's oeuvre. Steinberg, the Watkins siblings, Wichter, and Clarridge all gathered 'round one mic to downright sizzle on Bill Monroe's "Big Moon." And nearly the entire cast dug into "In the Pines" with relish.

Apple, in pigtails and waxing euphoric over a Magic Johnson-signed basketball she was due to receive, provided the evening's supply of non sequiturs. She more than earned her spot in the group, though, nailing every song she sang, whether breathing lungfuls of strange new life into Dylan's "Tombstone Blues," blending beautifully with Sara on "Where I Ought to Be," or showing the edgy depth she's known for on her own "Mistake."

It was the kind of show you don't want to see end. Indeed, it was one of those for the "best of" lists. The Watkins Family Hour is as fine and satisfying a musical experience one could expect to have.