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VESPER: The south Orange County band features, from left, singer-guitarist Isaiah Mickelson, lead guitarist Jason Owen, drummer John Adams and bassist JJ Simonon.

Photographer: LISA SIMON

Orange Pop: Vesper growing beyond south county

South county band Vesper is gaining acclaim.

By ROBERT KINSLER
Special to the Register

Vesper is no longer among Orange County's best-kept musical secrets.

The south Orange County-based quartet picked up best live acoustic band honors at the Orange County Music Awards in 2006, and won that coveted prize again this year.

Suddenly the unassuming and genre-defying band is everywhere, having appeared at venues such as the Coach House in San Juan Capistrano, BeachFire in Ladera Ranch, Martini Blues in Huntington Beach, the Whisky a Go-Go on the Sunset Strip and – most recently – at the legendary Troubadour in West Hollywood this week.

The group ("Vesper is Old English for nocturnal; of the night" according to the group's bio) features singer-songwriter Isaiah Mickelson, lead guitarist Jason Owen, drummer John Adams and bassist JJ Simonon.

"To me, playing live and being recognized (at the music awards), you have to shine in that moment," Adams explained. "That is our ultimate goal every time we play."

Vesper's sound will likely please fans of a wide range of artists, from Counting Crows and Coldplay to Crowded House and Jeff Buckley, even as the group forges a sound different than any of those acclaimed names.

During a recent interview, Adams said even the members of Vesper don't quite know how best to describe the group's sound, but use "indie groove rock" when pushed to explain the accessible and artful music they play.

And there is no question that Vesper's literate songs, which usually begin when Mickelson pens them to the accompaniment of his acoustic guitar, take on a beautiful and intoxicating sonic shape thanks to majestic arrangements that come courtesy of the tightly knit troupe's collective skills. Songs such as "Dressed to Kill," "Red Balloon," "Dead Gods" and "Pinstripes" are among the many masterworks created by Vesper since the band's lineup was solidified just over two years ago.

It might be easy to think it an exaggeration when Mickelson noted that Adams was the 49th drummer to audition for Vesper when he came to a rehearsal three years ago.

"I am pretty much a rock drummer," said Adams, adding that he was immediately impressed with Mickelson's strong vocals and original songs when he heard a demo three years ago.

"The first audition was without a bassist and was very experimental. I was getting out mallets, brushes, sticks. They cut me loose and wanted to see where I would take it."

Mickelson noted that it was difficult for him to find the right group of players for a number of reasons beyond the cliché of being a "perfectionist." He explained that while many young musicians play music as a means to an end, he was more interested in finding musicians who love the actual experience of playing music and crafting memorable recordings.

"I really do enjoy every time we play," Mickelson said.

The group is working on cutting a new single. They have gone into the studio with Todd Nichols (lead guitarist of Toad the Wet Sprocket) and hope to have that recording available soon.

"We have enough original material to put out two full albums," Adams said.

Added Mickelson: "It's very important to us that we respect the songs like they are an entity to themselves. They (each) have energy and a life force. To capture that so all people (the band's audiences) feel that that is not an easy thing to do."

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