

From the parking lot to

Despite road blocks, The Accidentals see nothing but green lights ahead

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO • SIGHT & SOUND EDITOR

BENTON HARBOR — It happens maybe four times a year. Venues book The Accidentals, the Traverse City-based indie folk band of Katie Larson, Savannah Buist and Michael Dause, on reputation alone, and then panic when the young trio shows up for the gig.

“They find out we’re not 21, and they get upset,” says Buist, who at age 20 is the eldest of the group. “We’ll do sound check. Then they’ll kick us out and we’ll sit in the parking lot for three hours until it’s time to play. Then they want us to leave immediately after the show.”

It’s happened with enough frequency that Larson took the band’s inside joke of a mantra — “get me out of this parking lot” — and turned it into the chorus of a new song. The accompanying video for the aptly titled “Parking Lot” features the trio performing in blizzard-like conditions in the lot of a Buick dealership.

The tongue-in-cheek number is a taste of what’s ahead for The Accidentals in 2016 as they march toward the highly-anticipated release of their next album, which they’ve been recording with Grammy Award-winning producer Stewart Lerman (Sufjan Stevens, St. Vincent, Regina Spektor) and pop music icon Marshall Crenshaw.

“The next album is something we’re putting so much thought into,” Larson, 19, says. “We’ve been working on it for a long time and are glad to say it will be out this year. We’ve been working on a ton of new stuff. We’ve been experimenting with more and more genres and more instruments. We have some stuff we’ve kept in our pockets that we’re now ready to share with everyone.”

The much-buzzed-about band, which performs Friday night in the final installment of the Hanson Theatre Living Room Series at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center, has already come a long way since

Larson and Buist met in 2011 as students in the orchestra program at Traverse City West Senior High School.

“We were total orch dorks,” Buist says. “Katie was playing cello and I was playing violin and we got kind of thrown together in this after-school group called ‘alternative styles.’ Basically it was a bunch of string players who would get together and play Zeppelin. ... We were the only two out of this group to volunteer to play at an after-school meeting so she came over to my house and instead of playing the music we were supposed to be learning, we worked up a song by the White Stripes and pretty much became a band that night.”

Both Buist and Larson grew up in musical families. Their mothers (Amber Buist and Mary Larson) both sing, and their fathers (Rick Buist and Steve Larson) both play piano professionally.

“We were both raised on a lot of different kinds of music,” Buist says. “Music was a variable resource for us. My total jam when I was 5 years old was ‘Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’ by The Beatles. My dad always played that for me.”

Larson’s parents also teach at the Interlochen Center for the Arts, but it wasn’t until the school offered a songwriting program that the two young musicians decided to



ABOVE AND ON THE COVER: The Accidentals, the Traverse City-based Americana band featuring, 1 the Hanson Theatre Living Room Series at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center.

audition for the school.

“Since my parents worked for Interlochen I would go to camp there every summer so I had a glimpse of what Interlochen was about,” Larson says. “I was interested in Interlochen but didn’t see a place where I fit in. When Savannah and I formed the band and started gigging that was the year

Interlochen announced the singer-songwriter program and so the timing was perfect. We auditioned with our first CD, and we got in. It was an exciting time, just meeting and working with other artists who were our age. It was like a mini-college experience.”

Although both Buist and Larson were

to the musical fast lane



Photos provided / Tony Demin

From left, Katie Larson, Michael Dause and Savannah Buist, perform Friday in the final installment of

accepted into Berklee College of Music, they opted instead to continue the momentum of the band. The Accidentals released their first two albums, 2012's "Tangled Red and Blue" and the 2013 follow-up "Bittersweet," before Larson had even graduated from Interlochen. Since then, they've won album of the year and best new artist at the

WYCE Jammie awards, scored the documentary "One Simple Question" and placed songs in the indie film "Please Wait to Be Seated."

"You're always going to feel like you're missing something when you choose one option over another," Buist says. "The key is to stay in the present, gather all the exper-

IF YOU GO

Who: The Accidentals

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: Lake Michigan College's Hanson Theatre, The Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$15, \$10 for students, seniors and Mainstage Series members

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.moreaccidentals.com

ience and the knowledge with whatever you do in life. The more work you put into something, no matter what, the more success and rewards it will yield for you. Even though we're not in school right now, it doesn't mean we're not going to go to college at some point. We're total nerds."

Since making that decision, and adding Dause to the fold in 2014, The Accidentals have toured almost relentlessly.

"Having Michael has definitely expanded our ability to arrange our songs," Buist says. "Before we had a drummer one of us would cover the rhythm section by playing the guitar or cello, something that kind of holds everything together. When Michael came in we had a lot more room to be flexible with the parts that we were playing on our instruments."

In 2015 alone, The Accidentals played more than 200 shows, and were named one of Billboard Magazine's top seven breakout bands of South by Southwest (SXSW), the Austin, Texas festival they will return to in March.

"It was kind of mind-blowing," Buist says of last year's SXSW experience. "South by Southwest is less of a festival and more like a convention for aspiring people in the arts. It was really cool to make connections there. It's what we spent the majority of our time doing. We wanted to watch more live shows, but we're not 21, and a lot of the venues are 21 and up, so it was hard to get in and see people that we wanted to watch. That was harsh. But we're going back to South by Southwest this year and are hoping to capitalize on those connections we've been making as well as making new friends

and collaborating more."

"We love jamming with other artists, especially on the violin and cello because that's how Savannah and I kind of got our start," Larson says. "A lot of the vocal artists in Northern Michigan let us jump in and we learned so much from doing that – jumping from folk music to a Celtic tune to being able to jump into a punk rock set. It really helped expand the styles we learned about and then we find a way to incorporate it into our own music."

Although Buist is primarily a violinist and Larson a cellist, both play a host of instruments – including guitar, banjo, piano, accordion and bass – delivering catchy indie folk-rock, acoustic pop and gypsy jazz tunes for a sound they say is still constantly evolving.

"We've been adding electric guitar and electric bass, so we're hoping to capture some of our live, upbeat energy for this upcoming album," Larson says.

"Katie has this insane ability to come up with these chord progressions," Buist says. "When you look at them on paper it's like, 'What?' But when you play them it makes total sense. Plus she's just crazy on that cello."

"I think Savannah and I just magically have complimentary personalities," Larson adds. "When we play we seem to balance each other out. She has this crazy ability to sing harmonies on anything. And she's also great at improvising, and those are things that took a long time for me to get comfortable with. ... We both got pretty lucky."

As for that "Parking Lot" video, The Accidentals admit that they had more than one motivation for shooting it. They wanted to enter it into a contest to win a spot on NPR's Tiny Desk Concert segment, the long-running intimate live performances recorded at the desk of All Songs Considered host Bob Boilen. It wasn't until after they shot the video, however, that they read the fine print.

"We got done with it, we were about to submit it online and then we looked at the rules and it said you have to be 21 to win the contest," an exasperated Buist says. She pauses, laughs and then adds, "We entered it anyway."

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