

Wunderkinds from Williamstown

Indie folk band Darlingside at The Kate Friday

By Lisa Reisman

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OLD SAYBROOK » One spent two years after college as an itinerant street performer. Another is a classically trained cellist. A third took advantage of a post-college fellowship to travel and study the traditional music of Brazil, Turkey and Ireland. The last, trained as a field biologist, toured nationally as a boy alto and worked on a cruise ship before deciding on a career as a guitarist in an indie folk band.

As disparate as those backgrounds may seem, the members of the twenty-something Massachusetts-based Darlingside, which will appear at The Kate on Friday, share a few common threads — besides music, of course.

All, between 2006 and 2009, sang for the all-male Williams Octet, an a cappella group, as undergraduates at the elite Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. And all enrolled in a 30-day winter study course, “Contemporary American Singer-Songwriter,” according to Don Mitchell, the boy alto, in a phone interview from the band’s studio in Boston.



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Darlingside plays at The Kate Friday night.

There they learned the word *darlingcide*. Literally defined as “killing your darlings,” it means that for any art to be good, its creator must be willing to get rid of some beloved individual sections to create a better whole.

It was a word they heard more than once in the course, Mitchell said. The songs they cobbled together, practicing *darlingcide*, led them to seek an audience. They formed a college version of Darlingside, changing the spelling of the last syllable, said Mitchell,

“so it wouldn’t sound morbid.”

Still, how did it come to be that this unlikely combination of talents engaging in a diverting — and temporary — extracurricular collegiate activity transformed itself into a critically acclaimed band with a growing fan base?

“A young, independent band is no different from any other start-up,” said Mitchell. “We all have our own jobs within the band, in addition to writing and recording our own music.” The former street per-

former, David Senft, for example, designed the band’s website. The classically trained cellist, Harris Paseltiner, focuses on merchandise and audio production. The specialist in Turkish music, Auyon Mukharji, acts as tour manager.

“All of us are super-invested in what’s going on,” said Mitchell, who’s in charge of social media. “All of us view being in the band as a full-time commitment. There’s nobody who’s just along for the ride.”

And that extends to Darlingside’s idiosyncratic

sound as well. “Its songcraft is a sum of careful contributions from each member, layered with mellifluous vocal harmonies,” the Boston Globe wrote last April. “In addition to Mitchell on electric and acoustic guitars, Mukharji plays mandolin and violin, Senft adds guitar, bass and percussion, and Paseltiner plays cello, plus some guitar and bass as well.”

Not least, “they all sing like birds,” according to Heather Maloney, a singer-songwriter who’s been hailed by the Huffington Post for “terrific lyrics that cut to the chase” and toured with the group for a year. It’s a rarity, she has said, “to have an entire band of people where all four of them can sing the lead if they wanted to.”

Indeed, the group has no frontman. Four distinct voices cluster around a single microphone, bluegrass-style, with each song featuring a new combination of instruments, drawing from folk, retro-pop, barbershop, and chamber music, and members trading lead vocals from moment to moment.

That’s by design, according to Mitchell. “Standing around one microphone, we’re really hearing each other sing in real life and not through speakers.” It also goes to the “democratic” nature of the group, he added.

Rolling Stone magazine took notice, describing

them as “a quartet with a rich line in acoustic textures and chamber-rock dynamics.”

Likewise, the New York Times, following a house concert in Chicago, praised the “four a cappella singers who met at Williams College and have built on their voices with violin, cello, mandolin, guitar and other instruments.” The newspaper’s website also posted a freshly recorded video of Darlingside and Maloney performing Joni Mitchell’s “Woodstock” on its music blog.

And at the Falcon Ridge Folk Festival’s emerging artist showcase a few summers ago, Darlingside received the most votes from the audience to return and play in the 2014 festival’s “Most Wanted Song Swap,” one of the highlights of the annual three-day festival, which includes more than 60 performers spread out over four stages.

“There is simply nothing more rewarding than performing live with your best friends and showing a crowd something you just thought up in your living room,” said Mitchell.

Even, it seems, if it involved killing your darlings.

Darlingside will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., at 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 27. For tickets and information, visit katharinehepburntheater.org or call 877-503-1286.