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'Tides' that bind: Beyond loss, Mulligan charts course fueled by friendship

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The three guys in local rock band Mulligan aren't related. But they sure seemed like family as they kidded each other throughout an interview last week at Kraftbrau Brewery.

They laughed about how they used to steal each other's girlfriends, and wouldn't let lead singer and guitarist Jakob "Jake" Goheen get away with saying he'd never done it. They laughed harder when they talked about using tubes of frozen cookie dough as weapons on each other for revenge.

And drummer Dustin Smith's face practically lit up as he told about a time back in the eighth grade, when all the guys were still living in their hometown of Tekonsha, and he just couldn't stop conking bassist Derek Feltner in the head with the cast on his leg.

From the outside, they probably looked a little silly. But to locals Bob Shell and Anetra Grice, the band's new management team, the trio's playfulness is just one thing that makes the band worth banking on.

"They're like brothers," Shell said. "They are really happy and serious about what they're doing."

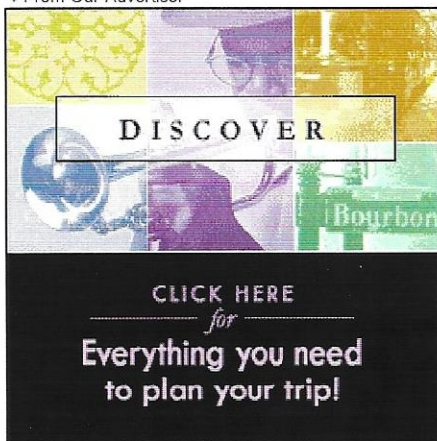
What they're doing on Saturday night at Club Soda is releasing their first LP in five years, "The Tides of Blackheart Bay." Three other bands -- Murder by Death, Ettison Clio and Your Best Friend -- will warm things up.

The CD marks a new page in Mulligan's story.

Last summer, they were signed to Shell and Grice's newly formed independent record label based in Marshall, called Hearts on Fire. (They took the name from a 1999 Mulligan EP.)

The pair approached Mulligan about becoming partners on the label two weeks after the guys rocked out in finals of the World Series of Rock 'N' Roll at Soda.

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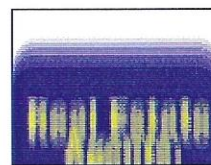
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Grice, who's spent more than 10 years on the local music scene as an organizer and fan, was drawn to the band because of its "refreshing sound," which was "a lot different sound than a lot of the bands" she'd seen.

She's not worried about having Mulligan be the flagship act on her label and sinking cash into the band's future.

"I couldn't have picked a better band," Grice said. "They love to play live shows. It's one of our running jokes that no matter where you tell them they're playing, it's never a joke to them. One time I told them they were booked to play a senior center. And Derek was like, 'What time?' They just love to play live. It doesn't matter where."

The band is young -- Feltner is 22, Smith is 20 and Goheen turns 21 in March -- but they've been together for six years, a long time for an unsigned local act. The secret to the longevity of the group seems to be their inability to stay ticked off at each other.

"We got all the s--- out of the way early on as a band," Feltner said.

"We've stopped stealing each other's girlfriends. And it's good that we came to blows earlier on," Smith added.

"We get in fights, but by 3 o'clock the next day, we're back in the rehearsal room," Goheen said.

When jamming together, the guys won't speak if something new is coming out. They'll simply continue to play, listening to each other, taking the music as far as they feel it can go.

"Then we'll just say, 'Oh, that was good.' We don't talk about it. ... That comes from playing together for so long," Goheen said.

The band has a new rehearsal room that they're not too crazy about. Maybe it has something to do with the address, 666 Porter St.

"It's haunted," Smith said.

After waiting a minute, there was no punchline. The other guys just nodded at Smith in agreement.

They then spilled a couple stories out about strange sounds in the halls, speakers and amps turning themselves on and off, and things being moved around in a room that had been locked. They weren't kidding this time. In fact, they seemed a little spooked about it.

Ghosts aren't a joking matter for the band. Maybe that's because they've lived through some personal tragedies that have bound them together and driven their music.

Their last full-length album, in 2000, was called "So Long Happiness." And their latest, "Blackheart Bay," is filled with crashing guitars and screamed laments on songs with titles such as "Dejection" and "I Am Missing, Not Missed." It's not just emo posing.

The disc also includes the track "Every Other Petal Spells Disaster," which was written about the suicide of their close friend Rick Pudak last year. Pudak was a constant presence at the band's rehearsals and shows and often acted as a roadie.

"He was the one who always wanted to fight," Smith said, a memory that made the whole band laugh.

"He was one of our best friends, and we don't have a big group of really close friends," Goheen said. "It hit us pretty hard."

The song's lyrics reflect the friends' sadness and anger:

"I'll grab myself a rose from up in front/
Limb from limb tear it apart/
This one means more than 'she loves me not'/
And every other petal spells
you're gone, you're gone."

Smith has been working on a video for the song, which includes footage of Pudak from home movies spliced in, as a tribute to their fallen friend.

"I try to think of it as more of a positive than a negative," Smith said about his friend's death.

Goheen said two other friends of his have committed suicide. Also, he and Feltner's first guitar teacher from their high school years killed himself.

"It (suicide) doesn't help anything out. It doesn't do any good," Feltner said.

"Too many emo bands talk about it (suicide) as a way out. We try to go against that," Goheen said.

Ten percent of the profits from the new album will be given to the suicide prevention center at Gryphon Place, a local nonprofit counseling and crisis prevention center.

In March, Mulligan will embark on its biggest tour ever, a two-week road trip that will cover about seven states.

The tour will be a chance to unleash energy pent up from spending the last half of 2004 in the studio working on the raw sounds and diverse tones of "Blackheart Bay," which includes 12 tracks of new and revised material.

The guys were excited, not intimidated, about the prospect of playing in new places to fresh audiences.

"It's always fun to win over people," Feltner said.

And besides, they're called Mulligan. They plan to keep taking that extra shot until they drive their music as far it can go.

[the lowdown]

Mulligan CD release show -- With Murder by Death, Ettison Clio, Your Best Friend. 17 and up. 9 p.m. Saturday, Club Soda.

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