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Meet The Host Country

By Avery Gregurich

Des Moines-based folk rock duo. The Host Country set out to record a new album in 2014. In an unexpected shift, the band has now doubled in size-ready to release a full-band creation and take the stage in its new form.

He's tall and lanky in a healthy way, sports a promising shadow of dark facial hair, and wears a burnt orange stocking cap. She peers around the room, wearing a greenish scarf, which her straw-colored hair weaves seamlessly in and out of. They smile when they see me approaching their table.

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band. From the beginning, the folk duo has welcomed listeners to experience their intoxicating combination of rich vocal harmonies and incomparable songwriting, both on stage and on recordings. From the evidence of the drink offer, it was apparent that the hospitality began with the people behind the music.

I met up with the pair to learn about the creation of their new album, due out in late spring on Midday Records. In it, Wistrand and Garles embraced a new set of sounds—and band members—in their musical, something they hadn't predicted at the outset of the recording process.

"When we went into the studio to actually record, we were fully intending on it to be in the same sort of vein as the EP," vocalist/guitarist Wistrand says, sitting in a downtown coffee shop an hour before the band's gig at Vaudeville Mews.

That self-titled EP was cut in 2011 at the Sonic Factory in downtown Des Moines. It consisted of Wistrand and vocalist/keyboardist Garles recording five songs live in an hour and a half over a work lunch break. "We wanted to get something down," Garles says. "Our friends were saying 'we want to listen to your music when you're not around!'"

This new record has taken longer than a lunch break to record; it's been under construction for over a year, the result of the expansion of instruments. After the initial recordings used the same bread and butter formula as the EP—acoustic guitar, keyboard, and vocals—The Host Country's producer Logan Christian suggested that some of the new songs might benefit from being fleshed out with full band arrangements.

This suggestion caused the pair to seriously consider the musical identity they had developed over the last few years.

"It was a real journey for us in a sense of do we want to give up what really makes us unique in a way?" says Garles, "Do we want to really flesh out these songs and push them to where we hear them in our heads?"

Ultimately, they decided to take the unexpected and uncharted leap into new sonic territory. Christian brought in local musicians Will Locker (of Bright Giant) and Scott Yoshimura (of The Envy Corps). These newcomers contributed their intangible prior recording experience to the record and their tangible musical talents in the form of drums and bass, respectively. In addition to the new rhythm section, the record also contains a string section on several tracks, and even an organ. While perhaps not the record they imagined creating when beginning the process, it's apparent that they are both pleased with and proud of the nearly-finished product.

"The fact that the songs have come to life a lot more than we originally thought they would is really satisfying," says Wistrand.

Because the musicians who added new parts to the record were also a part of other groups, [The Host Country](https://web.archive.org/web/20160115140519/https://www.facebook.com/thehostcountry/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160115140519/https://www.facebook.com/thehostcountry/>) needed to find other people to play these parts live. Wistrand and Garles had some friends who offered moderately (at first) to play with the duo live, then gradually insisted on doing so. Ty and Diana, who first met at the University of Northern Iowa, welcomed their old college friends Tom Rue (bass) and Ethan Weishaar (drums) to join The Host Country full time.

"They would have liked our band even without being our friends," says Garles. "They generally enjoyed our music."

"There was no learning curve about having to decide if we could get along with them," Wistrand adds.

Though the size of the band multiplied, the pair has decided to keep the original name. It's at times caused some confusion among concert-goers, which the founding members hope will quickly fade.

"Maybe they will always remember us because we are that band that's not actually a country band," says Garles, hoping the somewhat misleading name will become an identifying quirk.

They each chuckle, thank me, and invite me to come to their show. It's their first performance as a quartet in this city, presumably a frightening experience. But it's clear, by their nonchalance and their insistent invitation, that Wistrand and Garles receive the anxiety of the first live performance with new members with a grace and benevolence all their own.

And perhaps a drink or two.

Photo courtesy of The Host Country.

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