

Date: Mar 27, 2011; Section: Section L Progress; Page: 8L



Mande Radford, left, and Christi Johnson, right, are Althea, a Southern folk duo based out of Unicoi.

## Folk duo make home on Indian Creek

By MANSON MATHEWS  
Press Staff Writer  
mmathews@johnsoncitypress.com

UNICOI — A drive down Tennessee Highway 107 past Limestone Cove will eventually bring you to a cabin that sits right across from Indian Creek.

A vast array of stringed instruments — banjos, guitars and mandolins — and recording equipment are arranged around various rooms inside the neatly decorated cabin.

Mande Radford and Christi Johnson are Althea, an award-winning folk-duo who embrace the southern roots of the music they love, and the Unicoi cabin is the place they call home.

When Althea first formed in 1997 — a trio at the time with Carrie Theobald — Radford was a pre-med student at Milligan College and Johnson was studying English and psychology at East Tennessee State University. While the two were working in a music program with high school students, a friendship formed that has seen ups and downs throughout their career as independent artists.

In addition to their faith, the one thing that's remained constant is the fun Radford and Johnson have while making music together.

"I think the beginnings of Althea was we in college and we realized we loved music more than anything else, so why not spend every free moment playing music, even if there was nobody there to listen," Radford said with a laugh.

That free-spirited attitude seems to have paid off for the duo as their sixth full-length record "Tremble" was released in July.

Taking their name from Greek word for "truth" was an inspired choice when the group played their first concert at Milligan in 1997. Since forming, the duo has taken the name to heart.

"I think our name kind of keeps us coming back to are we being true to what we know and believe, and I think that what the truth looks like changes from year to year. The truth obviously doesn't change, but what is speaking to us and what's influencing us kind of changes as we get older, as it should I hope," Johnson said.

Radford, Althea's songwriter, agreed.

As long as I can be true to the experiences, it'll come out in the songs. Hopefully, if I'm being honest and true it will

**'As long as I can be true to the experiences, it'll come out in the songs. Hopefully, if I'm being honest and true it will resonate with the listener.'**

songwriter Mande Radford of Althea

resonate with the listener," she said.

After playing their first gig at Milligan, Althea set off on a whirlwind year that included making their first record over a Thanksgiving break in Nashville and traveling across the country during their first tour in the summer of 1998.

That first year was an important one for Althea. With Johnson fresh out of school and Radford still a student, the new world of traveling around making music for others to enjoy was an exciting experience for both.

"I think that's part of why it worked, because we were young and naive and we didn't have any responsibilities yet, and so we could just totally go for it and figure it out...we could afford to just make mistakes," Johnson said.

Rather than worrying about "adult" things like health insurance, Radford and Johnson were just enjoying their time starting out and making music.

"We just went for it, because we loved music and people wanted to hear it," Radford said. "And in a way, that's what we still do. But we do worry about health insurance now and the electric bill and all the normal things."

In 1999, Althea released their third album and caught the attention of Nashville's Rocketown Records. The group was in the middle of writing songs for their fourth album, thinking they were going to make it for Rocketown when the company decided not to bring them on board.

Althea persevered and set out to make the album themselves. In fact, the group recorded the entire album in the Unicoi cabin. Staying in the area proved to be special as the album, "What Light is All About," includes many songs about the area.

"Had Rocketown made the record, we would have never gotten to do that, so it ended up being such a gift that we got to do it the way we did it. And then when we got done with record, they heard it and loved it and ended buying it and releasing it on their label, so it kind of worked out per-

fectly," Radford said. The album was released in 2003 and was the last Althea record to be released as a trio. After the group had become a part of a record label with their latest record, the music industry imploded, according to Radford.

"People think that's really bad because artists aren't on labels anymore, but I kind of think it's good. For us it is anyway, cause there's magic that can happen when you're just doing like we did when we made the record here at the cabin. You just have the freedom to make what you want to make and your audience is gonna appreciate it if it's true and honest and an honest expression of the art," she said.

That kind of freedom allowed Althea to move on and release their first album as a duo in 2007.

"It was our first CD after the record label and we had all this support from Althea listeners, so we just got to make an album the way we wanted to make it and it was really fun," Radford said.

No matter if they're on or off a label or working as a duo rather than a trio, Althea always comes back to the music. Both Radford and Johnson said it's humbling to be artists in an area that already has such a rich musical legacy.

It's exciting for the duo to get out on the road and represent the musicians of East Tennessee.

"The banjo is my favorite instrument. The banjo is so indicative of this area, but I love the banjo because it can sound so sorrowful and sad, but then in the next beat it can sound joyful and happy," Radford said. "I think that with mountain people that is a picture of our lives and most of the mountain people who have lived here for a long

time...they know the picture of hard times and the picture of good times, so the banjo represents East Tennessee."

Radford and Johnson may not be sisters by blood, but they might as well be. They're best friends, partners, business owners and next door neighbors. Johnson's husband Justin Reilly even acts as the group's manager. Creating music together is just the way the two have learned to live life.

"The music is the way that we kind of work through everything in our lives and so this is how we deal with things and it's how we move on to whatever's next and it's why we travel around and it gives us also the opportunity to travel around and connect with people and to learn from people who are different from us and then that again fuels back into making more music which allows us to do it all over again," Johnson said.

Living and working around each other every day is part of what keeps their creativity flowing, as well as forcing them to be as true to their art as possible.

"It's so much fun to just hop in the truck and get on 81 and start heading up the Shenandoah Valley, and it just be like the two of us going to play music. It's so much fun," Radford said.

After the "Tremble" tour this summer, Johnson gave birth to a son named Samuel, opening up a new chapter for Althea.

The new things in their lives continue to inspire the music both Radford and Johnson create.

In addition to traveling around playing music — the duo just played at Song of the Mountains in Marion, Va. — Althea is working on a book, a double-disc children's record and their first live album.

"The one thing that we know that's not gonna change is Althea. For as inconsistent as it is to be in a traveling folk band, it's the consistency that we hold on to. ... We want to be 80-years-old and gray-haired and maybe be in rocking chairs on stage, but this isn't going to change, no matter what's happening in our lives," Radford said.

For more information on Althea, visit [www.althea.com](http://www.althea.com).