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The California-based Donkeys spent three years on their second album, *Living on the Other Side*, from start to release, and that combined with the quartet's warm, fluffy, unhurried music might create the impression that the band moves slowly. Some songs sound downright lazy.

"We're laid-back dudes," said keyboardist Anthony Lukens in a phone interview last week. "We try to make it sound like nothing's contrived or rushed. So I would probably take that as a compliment if something sounded, maybe, *effortless* would be a nicer way to say it. ... We're hardly lazy. ... We're definitely relaxed dudes. It takes us long time to get from Point A to Point B, because we're going to hang out and talk about it for a long time."

As proof of the band's work ethic, consider that it knocked out 22 minutes of music is less than half an hour in one of its two Daytrotter.com sessions, Lukens said, and it wrote and recorded four holiday songs (available at DonkeySongs.com/xmas.php) in a week.

Yet even that productivity reveals the band's casual demeanor. "It was a pretty good distraction," Lukens said of the Christmas songs, "because we were supposed to be getting ready for our tour coming up, and nobody wants to rehearse our songs. It's more fun to write new ones."

The band built its own Web site ("Most people would have probably hired some one to do it for them, but not the Donkeys," it reads. "We feel anything worth doing should be done by yourself."). These charming guys are also plenty self-effacing: "I think we are way better at playing music then making Web sites so don't take the structural flaws of this page as any indication of our musical ability," the site claims. "Because on that front there are no flaws. (Depending on what reviews you read.)"

There are further hints of oddity, such as a band logo that appears to be a cat. And the record, which was released in September on the Dead Oceans label, begins with the promise of Flaming Lips-style outré production, with a burp of amp noise and an errant, escalating electronic tone. All that's done in less than 20 seconds, though, and from there it's all mostly sunny melody and harmony.

Recalling country- and folk-rock heavyweights the Grateful Dead, the Eagles, and Crosby, Stills, & Nash, the Donkeys' music is a time machine set to the 1970s, although the band chafes at the "retro" tag.

On its bio for its former label, the band offered this admonition: "Just don't make it sound like we're retro or Sixties, e.g. psychedelic, jammin', captain tripish, mushroomafied, medieval, medical, tasseled, groovy, and so forth."

"People say that we're like kind of a retro-y band," Lukens said. "I don't think that's the case. We're like a modern band. We're just a rock-and-roll band."

Those protestations ring mostly hollow, yet that shouldn't be taken as a criticism; the band has an identity distinct from its references, and its music doesn't feel derivative. "Dolphin Center" could be a re-write of Neil Young's "Helpless" - with its sad amble and falsetto vocals - but it features an articulate guitar that breaks through the sleepy haze. The lyrics are suffused with sensitivity: "And I don't get cold / Unless you shiver."

As AllMusic.com concluded: "*Living on the Other Side* is uncalculated and unassuming its delivery, evoking an earlier era without dressing the band in Glenn Frey's castoff threads from the *Desperado* cover shoot."

The record took so long, Lukens said, because the Donkeys recorded it piecemeal whenever they were in the San Francisco area - laying down a song a day, with as much tracked live as possible - and in the basement of a southern-California roadhouse. "We got to stay there and keep a tab upstairs with food and beers," Lukens said.

The band recorded "whatever was sounding good, whatever track was feelin' right," he said, without an eye to the album as a whole. That only emerged during the mixing and sequencing process, when the band whittled 17 or 18 songs down to the final 11.

There is no grand vision at work here: "We know it's a good song when everybody wants to keep playing it and keep practicing it," Lukens said. "It's a really good one when we want to record it in our studio. It's a *really* good one if we want to record it at the fancy studio, when we have to pay for it."

Lukens doesn't dispute that the songs sound *old* - that might even be a point of pride - and he said he understands the source.

"We all love vintage instruments," he said. "And we love old records. ... I love when there's a sense of time to something."

That helps explain why the group has fallen in love with Future Appletree studio in Rock

Island where most Daytrotter sessions are recorded. Engineer Pat Stolley's vintage equipment has an obvious appeal to Lukens, who said his three-decades-old keyboard has a few years on him. "It's like a toy store in there," he said. "I can't wait to get my fingers on whatever new stuff they've got."

The Donkeys will perform at RIBCO on Saturday, January 17, with Pictures of Then, William Elliott Whitmore, and Meth & Goats. The show starts at 9 p.m.

To listen to The Donkeys' Daytrotter.com sessions, visit Daytrotter.com/daytrotterSessions/177/free-songs-the-donkeys and Daytrotter.com/article/1065/the-donkeys-encore-session. The band's Web site is DonkeySongs.com.

For an interview with William Elliott Whitmore, click here.