



Corry Ulan, left, Kathy Cook and Natasha Sayer are the vocalists and multi-instrumentalists behind Magnolia Buckskin. *MAGNOLIA BUCKSKIN*

BREATHING LIFE INTO SONGWRITING

Magnolia Buckskin's first album as a trio is a tribute to democracy

ERIC VOLMERS

The title of Magnolia Buckskin's latest album, *In The Round*, is appropriate for any folk act but seems particularly fitting for the veteran Calgary trio.

It is a reference to a songwriters' round, a mainstay of folk festivals where participants all take turns presenting their music.

It is a purely democratic endeavour, where everyone gets their say and everyone has a chance to contribute to their fellow songsmiths' offerings.

Magnolia Buckskin — which now consists of vocalists and multi-instrumentalists Natasha Sayer, Corry Ulan and Kathy Cook — is nothing if not democratic. It's enshrined in their makeup.

"We have a mandate of being equal," Cook says. "So we make sure that everybody gets their turn and we bring our songs forward. I've always thought of it as a breath of life. I'll bring in a song that I'll bring in personally and when Natasha and Corry add to it, it comes to life. It's very exciting. It's quite a thrilling process."

In *The Round*, the band's third full-length album, is a tribute to

democracy. Sayer, Ulan and Cook each contribute and sing lead vocals of four compositions each. They are even sequenced so each songwriter gets every third song, not unlike a songwriters' round you might see at the Calgary Folk Music Festival. Clearly, this system of governance works, given that the act has been around for 16 years.

In *The Round*, however, is their first album as a trio — a few years back, singer-songwriter Emily Triggs left the group to concentrate on solo work — and their first since 2015's *Die Laughing*.

So, with three writers contributing equally, there was a large stockpile of songs amassed over those nine years. While the album may not have an official theme, it is a collection that sounds both cohesive and harmonious and not just because of the distinctive, three-part harmonies.

"The most essential element for me, not so much in the songwriting but just being in this band, is our friendship," says Sayer. "We have seen each other through so much, so when we're going through something in our life, we bring a song about it and then we

get it because we've been through it. It's a beautiful thing that happens. Just musically, because we have been singing together for so long, we're not blood-related but it feels like we're related because we know how to blend our voices in harmony. The friendship bonds us and makes the music stronger as well."

On Feb. 10, the band will be joined by drummer Steve Hazlett and bassist Dale Ulan, who also engineered the album, at the Ironwood Stage and Grill.

Thanks to the traditional folk leanings of the sound — piano, acoustic guitar, accordion, violin, mandolin, banjo — and the fact that the album was recorded at Dale Ulan's 10,000 Cows Studio in Calgary using analogue equipment, the album has a warm, sitting-around-the-campfire feel that seems appropriate for the act's folksy musings on topics that are both fun and weighty.

"As time passes and as we get older, there's a little bit of death and a little bit of wistful nostalgia as well," Ulan says.

Cook's melancholic *Beyond the Veil* pays tribute to lost friends. Sayer's *Range Road Rambling*

looks back at her rural childhood and how she learned to drive at the age of 12 in a five-tonne grain truck. Ulan's accordion-sweetened *Mind How You Go* offers gentle philosophical reflections.

While the three principals in Magnolia Buckskin have a lengthy friendship that bonds them, they also have shared experiences professionally outside of the band. All three are music teachers who take their vocations beyond classrooms and private lessons.

As a band, they have worked with the Foothills Acoustic Music Institute (FAMI), overseeing harmony and vocal-improv workshops and teaching banjo, accordion and mandolin, have led workshops at Calgary's Ukulele Festival, and taught at Wellspring Alberta, a charity that offers programming for people living with cancer.

"I kind of think of it as a pond," says Sayer. "You put into the pond, you can't just keep taking out of the pond. To be fresh you have to put back in and that keeps things fresh."

Magnolia Buckskin will play the Ironwood Stage and Grill on Feb. 10 at 8 p.m.