

STRADDLIN' SUNSET

*Leslie and the Badgers mount an assault on The Echo this
September.*

Leslie Stevens is perched in the open hatch of a Nissan Pathfinder, playing a saw with a bow. It sings like a jailbird. I notice the saw's teeth are pointed inward, perilously pressed against the bare skin of her upper thigh, and my mind instantly alerts itself that I am in the presence of a genuine badass, *a creature who is afraid of nothing*, and that I should be careful not to make direct eye contact. I would not let the treacherous teeth of a saw within ten feet of *my* inner thigh and here this person is playing the damned thing between her legs like she's caressing a baby to sleep in her lap.

Circus Liquor looms, luring away a few band members who go scratching around for cheap beer. We're standing in a back alley in North Hollywood, the part of Los Angeles where every band in America has a practice space. [Leslie and the Badgers](#) are homeless though (Stevens has rid herself of "all rent obligations"), and for this evening's practice the band has borrowed space. Living between the cracks suits them.

"We're scene straddlers!" Stevens would later proclaim. "We're spanning the indie all the way to the country crowd."

And she's right. Leslie and the Badgers are becoming one of LA's most critically praised country rock bands. Their notoriety reaches from the older, earthier crowd of [The Grand Ol' Echo](#) to the Ray Ban-bearing hipster elite at [LA Record](#). Both institutions are sponsoring a night of The Badgers' residency at [The Echo](#) this month, and all the nights are co-presented by [When You Awake](#), the alt-country-folk blog that has helped unify and given context to a new generation of 70's Laurel Canyon-style sounds in and around Los Angeles.

Up in the rehearsal space, tallboys in hand, Leslie and the Badgers intelligently navigate my tired questions about touring and genre classification. Leslie asks for mood-lighting in the cramped room that's decorated with a *Killers Three* movie poster, a Yoo-hoo clock, and (of course) a velvet Elvis painting. Nary a saw is to be seen, so I breathe easy.

"People automatically assume when you say 'country' you're part of that Nashville scene, and the Nashville scene has antiquated itself with a kind of Desmond Child-style of pop record." That's Ben Reddell, a philosophical

type who, unfortunate above-the-knee cutoff jeans notwithstanding, seems to debate Aristotle's *Poetics* with his bass guitar every time he plays.

Charlene Huang, The Badgers' violin player with a penchant for fake eyelashes and Santana-brand shoes, (think "Asian Gsa Gsa Gabor") boasts "When people ask I say 'I play *fiddle*. In a *country* band.' Because I'm still into the rebellion of it, and people are like 'Eeewww!'"

"It carries a real bad stigma to it, country does," notes Travis Popichak, the band's drummer. (The quiet type.)

Popichak may be right, but music geeks' glacial cool towards country music seems to be thawing. Hipsters gleefully embraced Johnny Cash years ago and the internet has opened-up access to roots music so that Dolly-curious connoisseurs can explore the underbelly of country music without risking the mainstream country media apparatus.

And to that end, perhaps the key to The Badgers' success is how comfortable they are playing a senescent style of music in the era of the internet, embracing its boons rather than righteously rejecting them.

"At the risk of sounding like an old soul, I think the internet is amazing," marvels Stevens. "I was talking to this chiropractor in the coffee shop the other day and he

was telling me about instant messaging with someone in India. And I just thought, 'That, that's magic!' The fact that can happen. There's a lot of good with the internet, I think its just beginning. You can download our record in India just because we put it up from my house in LA."

Reddell adds "Our society is so wired at this point. We're all fans of music that is actually recorded on analog, but the crux is even if you do it that way, to put it on a CD you've got to run it through a digital computer. Even if you recorded it on tape and then only sold (vinyl) records, there's no way for the tape to get to the record without a computer."

Lead guitarist Glenn Oyabe, a deliberate fellow in horned-rimmed glasses who reminds me of my dentist, wisely surmises "As far as having to deal with things in the digital domain, you just can't really fight it. And I don't think it diminishes our true spirit or our true love of the music that got us into this in the first place."

About that spirit. Oyabe concludes my interview saying "Every time we play there is an emotional punch to the chest watching [Leslie] perform, and hearing her sing."

I corroborate this claim not five minutes later when the band begins to practice. Leslie and the Badgers saunter into a powerful rendition of "Winter Fugue" and suddenly

the mood lighting makes sense. An ethereal spotlight seems to land on Leslie, the kitschy decorations disappear into thin desert air, and I'd swear I was in an old American saloon if I hadn't just seen Stevens check her iPhone and make reference to [I CAN HAS CHEEZEBURGER](#).

Is that a tear on the microphone?

Any alleged eye moisture evaporates when Stevens' voice transmutes from ambrosial to caustic. She nearly bites the microphone when she snarls the words "Don't deceive me" and I'm reminded of those sharpened saw teeth. At times, Leslie *the* Badger might be a more apt moniker for this act; there is a very strong, serious person beneath her kicking knees and disarming-charming Missouri accent.

The dull glow of the Circus Liquor sign can be seen in the distance as I take leave of The Badgers and return to my car, parked next to the Pathfinder where I suspect that pesky saw is kept. As I drive down the alley I find my iPhone and pull-up *Roomful of Smoke*, the Badgers' recently released record. I skip to "Ballpark Lights," reminded of something Leslie said during the interview.

"I'd never gone to a Dodger game but I've been to two this year. Every time, I look up at those ballpark lights and it is bright as fuck! They're really bright, man."

Leslie and the Badgers play a FREE show every Monday in September at The Echo. 1822 Sunset Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90026. <http://www.attheecho.com> for details.

Roomful of Smoke [can be purchased on iTunes](#).