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# THE BROOKLYN FRIDGE

BY GABRIELLE LANGHOLTZ  
PHOTOS BY PHIL SHIPMAN

## HEM

*In the kitchen with a countrypolitan band.*

If you don't know the heavenly sounds of Hem, do not pass Go and do not collect \$200—go directly to [www.myspace.com/hem](http://www.myspace.com/hem) and bliss out while you read this interview. The hauntingly familiar, lushly orchestrated songs are lullabies for grownups, folk music for city folk. The seven-year old band—vocalist Sally Ellyson, pianist Dan Messé, and guitarists Gary Maurer and Steve Curtis—hails from Brooklyn, but their imagery and intonations conjure pastures and prairies as if they walked through a brownstone wardrobe to a Narnia in Nebraska. Critics describe their city-country straddle as *countrypolitan*, a word I'd never heard before but have been living nonetheless.

*Rolling Stone* called Hem's sound "passionate and beautiful" and the Associated Press declared it "exquisite." They've played with Elvis Costello, Beth Orton and Wilco at venues ranging from alternative rock mainstays to Lincoln Center.

Like our favorite cooks, Hem forgoes technological shortcuts. Their most recent soaring, string-laden album, *Funnel Cloud*, shoehorned all 18 pieces of the Gowanus Radio Orchestra into the studio: strings and woodwinds, harp and horns. The album cover looks like a needle-point pillow while the bucolic lyrics shine with rustic references to clapboards and clotheslines, trains and tornadoes, boxcars and barrels, marigolds and miracles, horizons and home. This spellbinding pull of the past recalls Gillian Welch or the Cowboy Junkies, and the Americana yesteryear yen makes for music as warming as roast chicken and familiar as apple crisp.



I stopped in on the band around dinnertime at the Ditmas Park home of front-woman Sally Ellyson. She's lived in Brooklyn for 13 years, previously in Cobble Hill. Back then she frequented Montero's ("the mother of the owner was probably 90 and brought down homemade—what were they, knishes?") and the Clark Street Diner ("that's when I was free and single!"), but today, married and a mother, she eats in. "It's changed so much since I had a baby," she says, bouncing one-year-old Henry. "Now the only place I go is the Farm [on Adderly]."

A reviewer called Hem the most independent-minded of indie bands, but don't think punk protest. In fact the Starbucks '07 Christmas album included Hem's lovely rendition of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," nestled between Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. Sally, who graduated from Evergreen College, where kids practically major in WTO protest songs, shrugs at the contradiction. "When I lived in Olympia, it was like Starbucks was the demon. But now we're excited to see Starbucks when we're on tour. They have really good coffee."

Liquor, though, proves a more reliable road fuel than caffeine: "When we're performing, we're big on bourbon. I prefer Maker's Mark but we usually get Jack Daniel's backstage, it's the one thing we can all agree on."

Sally, Southern by birth, looks forward to Waffle House. "I think butter and salt and pepper are the three most important ingredients. I also love this little, um, Irish-Scottish place called, ah, McDonald's. But truthfully the best place to go on tour is England, for the shepherd's pie, my most favorite thing."

So much for Americana. Still, that subset of folk under which Hem is filed reminds me of the values inspiring the revival of farm-based fare, and when I say so, the band riffs on this audible-edible connection.

"You get comfort in traditional American food and in traditional American music," nods Sally. "They're both warm and cozy."

"The technological world can be alienating," muses Gary. In both folk music and farmy food, "it's this mythologizing, this longing to feel connected to your society."

Steve also sees a parallel in opting out of industrialized experiences. "Food and music are both ways to dig in and feel more connected, of affirming what we love about this country."

But is it strange to croon for the country in a megalopolis?

Not for Sally. "Whenever I'm on tour I look for other places to live because, you know, cost of living. But the more I look, the more I love Brooklyn. It's a complex variety of experiences, like stepping back in time. There's a sense of adventure and culture and safety and wondering."

"Brooklyn's just such a fertile, creatively rich place," agrees Steve. "Hem is about tapping into memory, revisiting places we've been. And Brooklyn's a place where you can travel to the four corners, and also recreate your home."

**Just squish it**  
The food mill is the most important tool of my life. You basically take something and squish it in.



**Mindful**  
I try to buy organic as much as possible. I'm still breastfeeding so everything I eat goes to Henry. I don't want him to be five feet tall by age 12, or grow breasts.

**The white line**  
I like my knives dull because I'm a terrible klutz. I sliced into my hand once. I was cutting an onion. There's the white line of the scar. I do stupid things like that.

**Limonata**  
My favorite drink in the world is San Pellegrino lemonade. It's not at all good for you. It's really just sugar water. It's a soft drink. I love it.



**Buy the bunch**  
I love rosemary. Fresh herbs are really good, in particular dill. Just a simple chicken soup, you put dill in it and it tastes extra yummy and fresh.



**Relishing life**  
I'm a big relish-in-the-tuna-salad person, but that has nothing to do with the price of milk. □

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