

# CD Review: Spuyten Duyvil's Social Music Hour Vol. 1



Somewhere in the dusty recesses of my memory, I was vaguely aware that Spuyten Duyvil was an area in New York City, specifically in the Bronx, apparently named after a particularly unruly body of water. Since its literal Dutch translation is “spouting devil” I’d guess it’s not a sleepy little watering hole. So it’s only appropriate that this heavy Americana roots band shares its name, because there is truly nothing sleepy about New York-based Spuyten Duyvil.

Led by the singer-songwriting power-couple Beth Jamie Kaufman and Mark Miller, the sextet Spuyten Duyvil (pronounced “SPITE-en DIE+vul” for those playing along at home) are hard to describe in a few words. Their musical stew contains elements of traditional folk, Celtic, electric blues, rootsy Americana and spirituals, all done with an energetic modern sensibility that catapults their uniquely authentic vibe straight into the 21st century. Espousing the teachings of their musical pedagogues Mississippi John Hurt, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and others who they credit in the liner notes of their latest CD, *Social Music Hour Vol.1*, Spuyten Duyvil takes what was old and makes it new again.

The album begins with the slithering “Keep Your Skillet Good and Greasy.” Ten seconds into the bluesy, churning track and you can almost smell what Spuyten Duyvil are cooking, and man is it good. Though lyrically based on a old Woody Guthrie song, the band’s strongest assets are on full display and shine throughout, courtesy of gin-soaked vocals, droning slide guitar and a dark punctuating blues harp.

“Hot Time In The Old Town” sharply veers off the devil’s road and spontaneously sets up an old time revival meeting, complete with a knee-slapping double-time rhythm that would make Bill Maher a believer! Their spiritual reworking of this turn-of-the-century ragtime number spotlights the duel vocals of Kaufman and Miller, the latter employing a slight Louis Armstrong affectation, which unarguably works for this track.

On “Oh, Babe, It Ain’t No Lie,” Spuyten Duyvil takes the Elizabeth Cotton folk-blues number, famously covered by The Grateful Dead, and incorporates an updated electric and quite plugged-in approach, somewhat reminiscent of how The Band might have tackled it under the tutelage of Robbie Robertson. Demonstrating yet another facet of Spuyten Duyvil is the whimsical old-timey “Fishing Blues.” First

recorded in 1928 by blues guitarist Henry Thomas, Spuyten stay faithful to the original while injecting a playfulness that the original most certainly lacked.

*Social Music Hour Vol.1* ends with the uncharacteristically funky groove-laden "Stewball." Though not to be confused with the Peter Paul & Mary song of the same name, both are based on the famed award-winning racehorse. The band once again proves that they are not merely one trick ponies (pun intended), but rather can seamlessly switch musical styles with much ease and dexterity.

Luckily for fans of music that defines the American experience, Spuyten Duyvil have been garnering ample airplay across the globe, on satellite and terrestrial radio alike. Their backbreaking tour schedule finds them traversing the country, performing everywhere from small clubs, to Citi Field (a.k.a., Shea Stadium), and all points in between. Their live show has been described as "throwing a cherry bomb into a lake...it wakes you up!" But based solely on what I heard on *The Social Music Hour Vol.1*, Spuyten Duyvil are that rare breed of band that can cover songs written long before their grandparents were born, and reinterpret them so that an audience will swear on a stack of *Rolling Stones* that they are new. And in essence, isn't that really what the folk music tradition has always been about?