

# The "Forager's Harvest"

Playful Banter on Growth, Freedom and Embracing Change

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Article by Sara Catherine Lichon • Photography by Alison Tolpa of iKandilImages.com

Mushrooms, meditation, music. These are just some of the things that fueled Playful Banter - the moniker of Morris County singer-songwriter duo Alexis von Aulock and Kim Sanchez - through 2020. While the world experienced tremendous change over the past year, Alexis and Kim underwent their own transformations. Wise beyond their years, the two old souls used lockdown to discover what most fail to learn until much later in life, if at all: we are free to live life how we want, even if we have to step out of what's comfortable in order to grow and achieve our dreams.

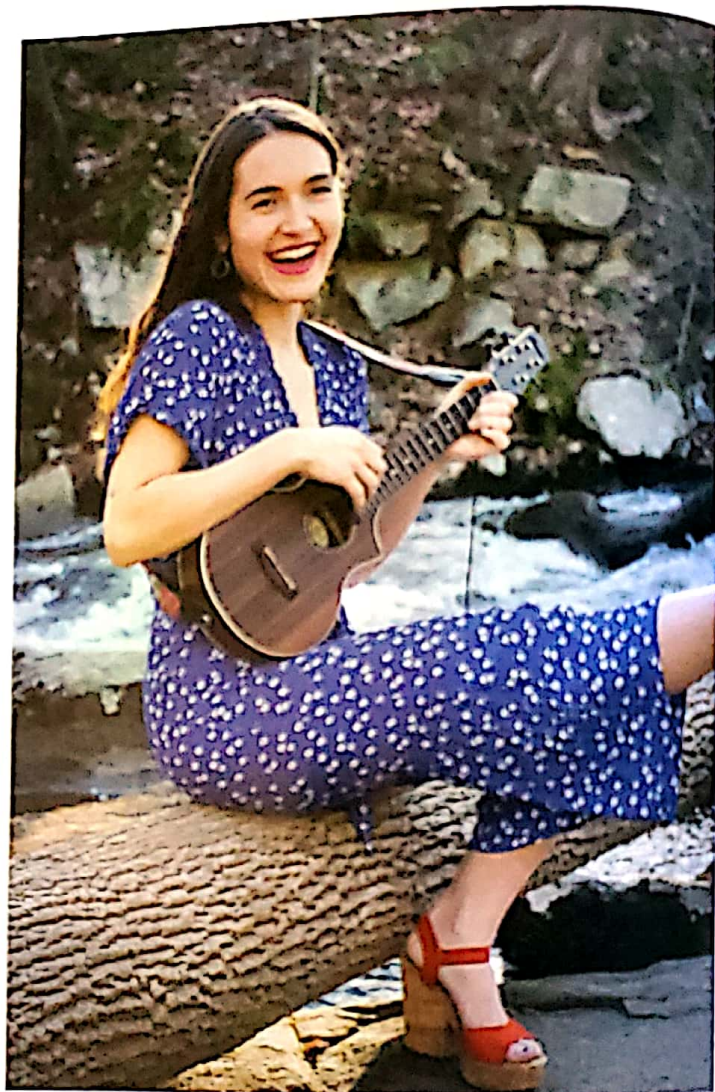
When Playful Banter perform, it's usually for an intimate crowd, but the energy is anything but small. The two grounded women fill the tiniest of spaces with heavenly harmonies and heartfelt songwriting, with one usually on electric or acoustic guitar and the other on ukulele - though who plays what changes with the song. With great soul and depth, Playful Banter take their listeners on a powerful journey. When I first saw them play, all of us - audience and performers - laughed together, cried together, and danced together through the night. That experience is at the core of Playful Banter.





Playful Banter - Alexis von Aulock and Kim Sanchez





Kim and Alexis describe their style as a "road mix" of indie folk, bluegrass, rock and reggae. "If I was listening to us play, it would remind me of open road music. I wouldn't mind listening to us on a road trip," Kim explained. And their concerts do consist of a mix of folk originals and covers/mashups of artists ranging from the Wood Brothers to Fleetwood Mac, Phish to Blondie. Shakey Graves, The SteelDrivers and Vulfpeck are also huge inspirations for the pair.

Before they were a band, Alexis and Kim were soloists. While each had their own individual path into music, both their families planted the seeds. "My father is a musician," remarked Alexis.

"His first instrument was piano, so I grew up playing the piano since I was four." To overcome stage fright, Alexis joined School of Rock, which helped her come to love performing.

For Kim, performing always came to her naturally. While she's her family's first musician, her father was a music buff who taught her to appreciate the craft. "Something that he loved doing was, if we were in the car and I didn't know who an artist

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was, he would go on these really long lectures about the history of these musicians," Kim reminisced. Inspired, she eventually bought a guitar and began performing at open mics and talent shows.

The two crossed paths in 2015 at Rest Stop Rejuvenate in Rockaway, and eventually began performing together. After a

music showcase inspired them to officially become a band, they wrote their first song together - titled, "Playful Banter." It was Kim who suggested they make it their official name. "When we practice, it's very funny, quirky, we're bantering back and forth - it's just very playful!"

And in the beginning, they were very playful - but completely unfamiliar with how to navigate professional performances. "We weren't where we are now as musicians," Kim explained as they looked back on their debut show at Middle Valley Community Center (MVCC), an intimate listening room nestled between Calfon and Long Valley. "We had no idea how to market a show, we didn't even know how to set up our own equipment." Luckily, they were helped by Alexis's



parents, her father becoming their sound technician and her mother their manager.

Bill Leavens, President of the MVCC, remembered Playful Banter's first show in 2017. "They were fun, but they were rough. But they could sing, and that's the beginning." Seeing potential, the MVCC community encouraged the band, who returned to perform year after year. "They had matured substantially" by their second concert, Bill said. "They had made a quantum leap into getting good."


This support was what Alexis and Kim needed for their musical talents to grow. "They took a chance on us," Alexis smiled at the memory. "Honestly, it changed our lives. We needed support and they so graciously gave it to us. It was part of what pushed us to keep going, and it's why we love going back there every year."

But then 2020 came, with COVID-19 lockdowns and massive fear and uncertainty. Like many, Alexis and Kim wondered how to navigate the change surrounding them. So, they turned to the earth and found their answers in gardening and foraging, meditating and songwriting.

"Lots of major changes were going on. Riots were happening, COVID really started to break out...and we sat down and asked, how can we take our power back?" Kim explained. "It's hard not to feel helpless in this sort of situation. We came back to, how do we take care of our bodies, and our spirits and our minds? We started manifesting this very earthy lifestyle, bringing it back to our ancestors a thousand years ago."

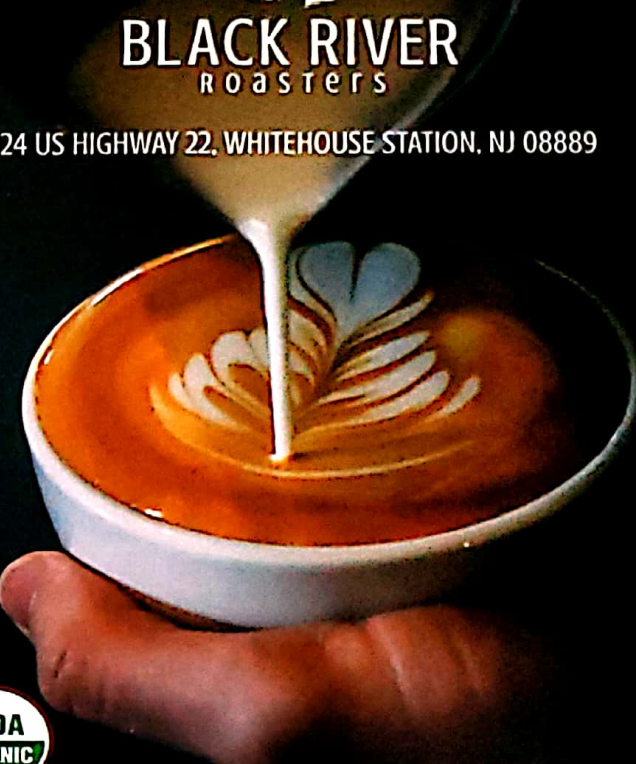
And they must have made their ancestors proud as they became expert gardeners and foragers. Laughing, Kim remembered how they had tremendous luck with foraging "pounds and pounds" of mushrooms. Living off the land fueled the women's creativity, resulting in one of their most musically diverse originals, "Forager's Harvest," which came naturally to them according to Alexis. "There's times where your heart is so heavy and the emotion is so strong, it just pours out of you. I was longing for a sense of power in a time where I was upset with the way the world was going. And that's where the really powerful music comes from."

Kim and Alexis definitely take back their power through this song - though it's more like three songs in one. "Forager's Harvest" starts with a determined but mournful melody on two acoustic guitars, while Alexis and Kim alternate verses detailing how they turned to nature for healing during times of despair. The second part starts to pick up with tight harmonies in a major key, reminiscent of folklore and fairy tales, as they weave a fable of a woman tending to her garden on a "quest to tame this rage, this frustration with this age." The song picks up even more in its powerful conclusion, a revolutionary anthem with a steady beat, the women belting a vow to march forward, hold



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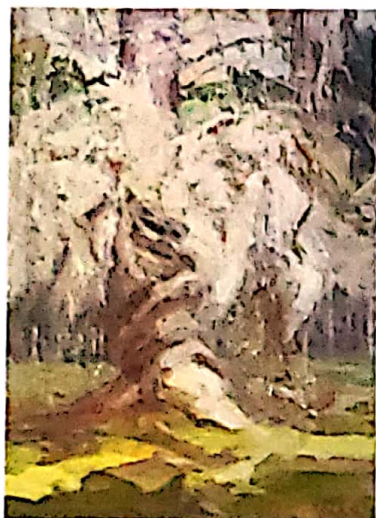
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their heads high, and "keep on waving that flag." ([www.facebook.com/playfulbantermusic/videos/329669728387564](https://www.facebook.com/playfulbantermusic/videos/329669728387564) at the 24:50 mark.)

While their music continued to grow, so too did their personal philosophies. The women realized they have a passion for free living. Kim especially came to terms with the idea that her American Dream - to take time off work and travel - was much different than the traditional notion. This realization came while on a road trip with her boyfriend, the first time she stepped outside of her comfort zone and New Jersey. "Life will still be here. I don't want to let fear hold me back. It's been a lot of monumental change towards that."

Meanwhile, Alexis and her boyfriend began renovating a van into a tiny home and planning their future of traveling the country together. "There are so many different people living a successful life in their eyes. There are a million different people living a million different lives, succeeding in a way that works for them," Alexis explained. Her and Kim's way of living may be different in the eyes of some, but it's their truth and joy.

While Alexis and Kim have been on an upward trajectory since their families and MVCC tended to their roots, the course of 2020 pushed the pair into taking over their own garden, growing into who they were meant to be. So, what's next for Playful Banter? Bringing the show on the road, as soon as the van is ready. In the meantime, Alexis says: they're "always creating." And, engaging in some playful banter.

About the Writer - A Long Valley, NJ native, Sara Catherine Lichon is a storyteller with a passion for arts and culture, nature, history, and all things local and indie. When not writing, she can be found hiking and kayaking, singing and playing ukulele, and serving on Washington Township's Historic Preservation Commission. You can read more of her writing on her blog, <https://sincerelyscblog.com/>

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