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MUSIC; Once More to the Abyss For the Wrens

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TEANECK - THE Wrens have a new album scheduled to be delivered in July. But you can't blame the band's fans for snickering. The Wrens' last CD took four rough-and-rocky years to come together.

But "The Meadowlands" (Absolutely Kosher, 2003) was a nearly universally acclaimed disc of bright literate pop that has sold 33,000 copies and was released earlier this year in Britain, where it met with a frothy reception and landed them a string of sold-out dates. And Charles Bissell, the 16-year-old band's singer/guitarist, has lately made the leap from living with his band mates in a home studio here that is way more studio than home to settling with his girlfriend in a Brooklyn apartment and quitting his day job at an ad agency.

And for the first time in his adult life, he has even bought furniture. It wasn't until the band's guitarist, Greg Whelan, was married a couple of years ago, Mr. Bissell said, that any of the band members -- who are in their late 30's and early 40's -- had ever bought furniture. "We'd been living like we were in a frat for a long time," Mr. Bissell said.

The making of "The Meadowlands" is near legendary in its angst. It started in 1998, after a messy separation from the Wind Up label, and took four years to complete. It so spooked band members with its refusal to gel that a funk settled over their home. "The House That Guilt Built," the opening song on "Meadowlands," captures what it feels like to room together without a record deal while holding down paper-pushing day jobs.

"When we went into it, I said, 'Oh, it'll take a month,'" Mr. Bissell said. "But we couldn't tell we weren't any good, and we weren't happy with it. We maybe should have started again on new songs, but we stuck with the same songs, and living in the house together. Any time we were in the house, we knew we had to get a record out."

The band's drummer, Jerry MacDonald, who now lives in Philadelphia, road-trips with his wife and three children to Teaneck for Wrens business. "It was bizarre, working without a label," he said. "It was like pushing this rock up this hill."

Kevin Whelan, singer, bassist and brother of Greg Whelan, who, for the evening's test-the-waters jam session, sat with a beer behind the keyboards, added: "There was this sense that if we finished it, that would be the end of the band. It was sort of an abyss."

Now, though, "Meadowlands" (it was preceded by "Secaucus") is more like a totem of what sweat and massive doubt mixed with determination reaps. "We still do day jobs," said Greg Whelan, who works at Pfizer and lives around the corner from his brother, the final holdout holed up in the home studio. "But one of us has ventured into music full time, and the others are hoping and wishing."

Given the struggle surrounding "Meadowlands," the session for the new album, which found the four musicians hauling new equipment down to the basement that guilt built and easing into an improvised melody, ought to have felt fraught. The still-unnamed disc, to be released on Absolutely Kosher, is the well into which they would throw shiny pennies "if we hadn't already gotten our hearts ripped out of our chest, if we weren't still dreaming we were going to be rock stars," Mr. Bissell said.

Instead, the session flowed, with each member settling into the shards of an up-tempo wordless song that suggested nothing short of 16 years of living and playing together.

"We're in the upswing of the marriage," Mr. Bissell explained after recording a few minutes of unanimously approved new music.

But if July comes and goes without a new Wrens album, Mr. Bissell suggested, things could turn really ugly.

Photo: The Wrens, from left, Charles Bissell, Greg Whelan, Jerry MacDonald and Kevin Whelan, working on their new album in a basement studio in Teaneck. (Photo by G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times)

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