

Husband and wife duo cover the hits with humor

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The first time Tony and Michelle O'Donnell played at Rankin' Tacos, Michelle chipped her tooth on the microphone. O'Donnell recalls her singing about it in the middle of a song as the crowd broke out into a round of laughter. That's the one and only style of Hot Mess.

"We don't take each other seriously," says O'Donnell. "We joke around with the crowd. We're good at harmonies, we play whatever we want and we like that."

The husband and wife duo formed in 2017. They quickly became party favorites at venues around Tallahassee and beyond. Currently, they're on the road playing gigs up and down the Gulf coast including in Destin, St. Andrews and Panama City.

O'Donnell's love of music reaches back to his high school days in jazz choir. He always dabbled on the guitar and sang as a front man in several bands. O'Donnell started as a music major at Florida State University, but switched over to communications. He's continued to use his skills in that area to organize bands and make a living as a musician. He is the lead vocalist for the Groove Merchants, Redshirt Freshmen and Black Jacket.



Tony and Michelle O'Donnell of husband and wife duo Hot Mess perform along the Gulf coast. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

His strongest core group of friends and bandmates have been able to play all over the southeast, and internationally, including Scotland. While he would describe himself as more of a "lounging" singer, he most enjoys being in the mix with musicians of every sound and style.

"I try to surround myself with people that are better than me," says O'Donnell. "I want everyone in the band to be more talented so I can be a front guy. I'm really good with crowds and getting crowds

If you go

What: Tunes on the Terrace with Hot Mess

When: 7-10pm, Friday January 15

Where: Rankin Tacos, 2386 Allen Rd

Contact: For more information, please visit <https://www.hotmessstally.live>.

into the set."

The key to Hot Mess is their wide range of cover music which O'Donnell says they are able to use to connect with the crowd. Last year, they walked into a rooftop bar to 700 rowdy college students. Once they saw the crowd, O'Donnell says they made a quick changeup to their song lineup, opening with "Shallow" from the film "A Star is Born" in order to grab their attention.

They've averaged 17 gigs each year for the past two years and weren't expecting to have half as many once the pandemic hit early 2020. However, Hot Mess turned to online livestreaming to make up for the lost venues and ended up surpassing their past numbers and playing 19 shows.

"We consider ourselves very fortunate and hope things are going to continue turning around," says O'Donnell. "We got so much feedback from friends

and family about how much it meant to them to feel normal for a minute on those livestreams. We did it for an hour and sang songs, and could see comments as we were singing from fans in Texas, New Jersey, Virginia and Georgia. It was heartwarming."

That sense of connection has continued into the new year as they expand their repertoire of dance-off and party songs. Their range spans from slow ballads like Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" to "booty" songs like Justin Timberlake's "SexyBack." O'Donnell always challenges the crowd to request at least three songs, and says that they will know how to "hack" their way through at least one.

Their most difficult request was Boston's "More Than a Feeling." O'Donnell says even if they only know a few chords, half the fun is having everyone sing along and provide the energy. Hot Mess will often play songs that were written and performed by other married musicians. Top of the list for them is the band Fleetwood Mac, which featured two married couples who went through divorces at the time of recording their album "Rumors."

"They just had this chemistry on-stage," says O'Donnell. "That's what Mi-

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chelle and I have. She'll get mad at me and give me an arm slap if I play something wrong, but we joke and we love each other offstage and onstage."

The cozy patio at Rankin Tacos has become a haven for musicians in the area who are still grieving the loss of Midtown performance spaces. O'Donnell says many venues were shut down during the lockdown last spring. He has been grateful to businesses like Rankin Tacos who are reaching out to the music community with events like "Tunes on the Terrace."

As far as goals for the new year, O'Donnell hopes that he and Michelle will begin writing an original album within the next few months. They'll focus on creating an alternative country, Americana, blues inspired sound for an album they'd like to release in 2022. In the meantime, they will continue to bring safe, socially distant tunes wherever the wind blows them next.

"We enjoy the people," says O'Donnell. "Whether you're at a wedding with a family or at a gig, Hot Mess is just fun because I get to play with my wife and bring happiness to others. We want people to have fun."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).