

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.

I’m June Simms.

Today we play songs from a long-awaited album from the band Phoenix.

We also tell about a way to unload unwanted clothing and still have something to wear.

But first we visit a famous show at America’s Smithsonian Institution.

Smithsonian Craft Show

The Smithsonian Craft Show is the most respected show of its kind in the United States. It is also one of the most difficult for artists to enter.

This year, more than 120 artists displayed their work in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Building Museum in Washington, DC. Steve Ember tells us about one of them.

Bob McNally considers himself both an artist and a musician. He invented an instrument he calls a Strumstick. He says it is designed to get everyone to make music.

“People are capable of playing musical instruments, but if you play an instrument and get frustrated with it early enough, you decide, it’s you, there’s something lacking in you. And I wanted to make an instrument that was a frontal assault on that misunderstanding.”

The Strumstick has only three strings. Bob McNally says that makes it easier to play than other stringed instruments.

“The frets are spaced to give you just a major scale, Do-Re-Mi, and that means that when people squeeze one string, they get a couple of notes in the background for free, and they get the notes of a major scale, no wrong notes.”

He sells about 3,000 Strumsticks a year. The price starts at about \$170 and can go as high as \$340, depending on the kind of wood used and other materials added to the instrument.

Many of Mr. McNally’s sales come from events like the Smithsonian Craft Show.

Twelve kinds of media were represented at the show last month. It included the work of fabric artists, glass artists, leather workers and also furniture and basket makers. The admission process for artists is very competitive.

“I’m always extremely grateful when I get in because it’s obviously a good show to do in terms of business, but the thing that’s almost more important is that the people who come to the show, the public, are very educated about craft. They are very engaged, they are very excited, they are very responsive.”

Profits from the Smithsonian Craft Show go towards education, research and other services at the Smithsonian Institution.

Clothing Swaps

“Clothes-swapping” has become an increasingly popular activity for women in the United States. The women can give away unwanted clothing at a clothes swap event and get something different in return.

Clothes swapping lovers are now using social media to help publicize such events. VOA’s Michael Lipin went to one recent gathering in northern Virginia. Christopher Cruise has his report.

About 300 women went to the clothes swap at a high school in Springfield, Virginia. It was the largest crowd ever for the area’s popular clothing-swap group.

“Good brands here though, God, they’re good brands. I mean, this is a J. Crew sweater!”

The women bring to shirts, dresses and other clothing they no longer want. In return, they can take home almost anything they like. Ashley Moore was having a very good day.

“I bought five, or brought, five shirts and I, like, already kind of got, I got like two nice pairs of boots. And they were like new, not even used!”

Daphne Steinberg was, too.

“For anyone who knows Ann Taylor LOFT, Ann Taylor is a really nice women’s designer and, you know, I will totally wear this to work. So, you know, I love that, I love that I can outfit myself for work, have a good time in doing it, not totally bankrupt myself.”

Sandy Van Dusen likes the idea that clothes are finding new homes instead of being thrown away.

“Because it helps to keep the Earth green. There’s, there’s no point in my opinion in continuing to buy new clothes when we can reuse what’s already here. Give it a new home -- you know, let somebody else love what you used to love and no longer love.”

“Alright, come on down!”

Kim Pratt organized the clothing-swapping event in Springfield. She also organized a money-raising activity for the high school’s debate team. It is one of several ways that her group gives to charitable causes. Another is by donating all of the “un-swapped” clothing to shelters for victims of domestic violence.

Kim Pratt says she first heard about clothes swapping from Suzanne Agasi, who began holding private swaps in California in 1996.

“I started doing this myself four years ago, and we’ve been doing it for four years, getting bigger and bigger each time we have a swap.”

She used the social media website meetup.com to help publicize the events. The website has helped her group grow from 30 members to 1,300. Ms. Pratt says most of the members respect clothing swap rules. But she says competition for desirable fashion can be strong.

"We have to tell people sometimes not to hover over the new people coming in with their clothing. As they put it out, some people tend to grab the stuff right out of their hands and it becomes like a free-for-all. We try to avoid that as much as possible."

Phoenix "Bankrupt!"

The French band Phoenix is finally out with another album, and sales are strong. "Bankrupt" is number four on Billboard Magazine's list of the top-selling 200 albums.

That song, "1901," brought huge fame to Phoenix in 2009. It was on the group's fourth studio album, "Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix." The record went gold, selling more than 500 thousand copies. "Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix" won the band its first Grammy Award, for Best Alternative album.

Then four years went by – with no new music from the group. Last month, Phoenix released its fifth album, “Bankrupt!” The sound is pop with an edge. The band’s members told a reporter that David Bowie was a major influence on this album. And you can hear it in the first song, “Entertainment.”

Phoenix performed last weekend at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in Louisiana. Last month, they energized crowds at the Coachella Festival in California. And hours from now, they are to perform at the Sweet Life Festival in Maryland.

Phoenix’s members say they enjoy performing for crowds, and that they work as hard at that as they do in the recording studio. Bassist Deck D’Arcy told a reporter that was partly why they called the album “Bankrupt!” He said they gave everything they had to get to this point. In his words, “in that way, it’s meant as a term for absolute commitment. There’s a notion of the absolute in ‘bankruptcy’ that we like.”

Phoenix is surely committed to one song on the album. We leave you with the more than seven minute title track from “Bankrupt!”

I’m June Simms. Our program was written by Christopher Cruise and Katy Weaver, who was also the producer. Michael Lipin and Julie Taboh provided additional reporting.

Join us again next week for music and more on AMERICAN MOSAIC from VOA Learning English.