

# The Packway Handle Band



**I**t is seven years since the Packway Handle Band exploded on to the scene from their base camp in Athens, Georgia, to give a jolt to America's bluegrass circuit. Few new arrivals make such an instant impact. They had soon thrown the gauntlet down and emerged triumphant from a State-wide Miller Lite Battle of the Bands contest, blowing all 72 entrants—mostly rock bands—out of the water with their hell-for-leather, energetic, single-mic performance.

Much of their appeal rests in an ability to bring a fresh vitality to the performance while honouring the past, and handling rousing gospel, in particular, with an authentic firebrand understanding. In the process, they have built a huge 'teens and twenties' fan base as well as keeping old-school aficionados happy.

The band is a solid and innovative bluegrass quintet with an appeal that, though rooted in tight three and four-part vocal harmonies and crisp playing, is bolstered by a progressive brand of original material and a blend of off-the-wall covers, including Madonna's *Like a Prayer*. It is not surprising, then to find that fans include traditionalists and those who actually say they 'usually

don't like bluegrass'.

Even though they have progressive leanings that occasionally take them where others rarely tread, that they nonetheless appeal to mainstream bluegrass audiences is clear from the fact that they were finalists on three consecutive occasions at the prestigious annual Telluride Bluegrass Festival.

After releasing their debut album *CHAFF HARVEST*, in 2004, the Southeastern Bluegrass Association summed it up by noting: 'this is not a recording for those who would like bluegrass to remain frozen in 1953.' It was followed up in 2005 with the release of the album *(SINNER) YOU BETTER GET READY*, a storming collection one reviewer described as 'so hot it's close to spontaneous combustion'.

Today, the five-piece is famed for white hot performances, and being tipped as a band with all the vitality and playing style to make a major breakthrough worldwide. That initial tight bonding took place when three of the band met as school friends in the late 1990s, discovered they had similar tastes in music and went on to start gigging together.

This will be a first-time visit to the UK for a headline appearance at Glasgow's

big Celtic Connections Festival in January, followed by a string of other dates, with a brand new album—*THE PACKWAY HANDLE BAND*—to promote and several radio sessions to record. Band members, Michael Paynter (mandolin/vocals), Josh Erwin (guitar/vocals), Tom Baker (banjo/vocals), Andrew Heaton (fiddle/vocals) and Zach McCoy (bass), have an established following in Europe and will continue to tour in Holland and Belgium after their UK shows.

Several commentators have picked up on Paynter's unusual mandolin style. He plays the instrument upside down and in the process, has become one of the most exciting players on the circuit. Banjo player, Tom, like several of his sidekicks, a big fan of Bela Fleck, puts a lot of the band's appeal down to the fact that the onstage and offstage chemistry is so good.

"There is nothing better than to have the feeling that you are all there together with the one aim—to make sure everyone (and that includes us) has the best possible time," he says. "We all grew up listening to great music, and all had similar tastes, so there's a basic instinct to create something we all feel proud of. If it turns out to be magical, you won't find a happier bunch of guys."