



Music of Note samples recent recordings by regional and national bluegrass artists.

THE PACKWAY HANDLE BAND
“(Sinner) You Better Get Ready”
 13 tracks

When was the last time you listened to a recording that drew from sources such as Bill Monroe, the Louvin Brothers, and Roy Acuff, while also featuring a flute among the instrumental credits? Listeners have come to expect such eclectic surprises from the Athens, Georgia-based Packway Handle Band. In the year and a half since the band’s first disc “Chaff Harvest” was reviewed in these pages, the group has followed up that impressive debut with a busy performance schedule, and they’ve also found time to get back in the studio—or rather the back porch—(more on that in a minute) to bring us their second CD.

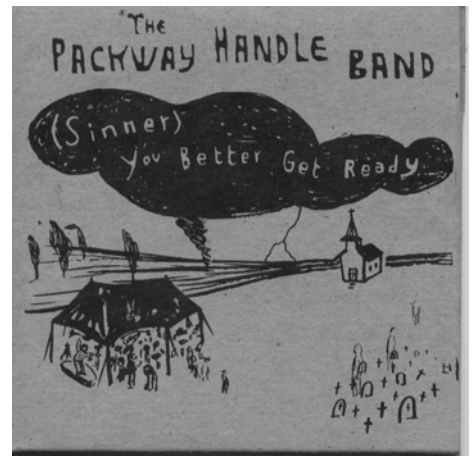
“(Sinner) You Better Get Ready” is a satisfying mix of well-known and more obscure gospel songs from the bluegrass, country, and spiritual fields. From the first cut, “Talk It All Over with Him,” the band’s distinctive sound is much in evidence; the PHB’s brand of acoustic music is marked by a combination of adventurous instrumental work and a vocal approach that differs notably from the traditional bluegrass style with warm, open harmonies that are reminiscent of groups like the Red Clay Ramblers closer to the old-time end of the spectrum.

A dark, brooding treatment of the spiritual “Wade in the Water” is fronted by the stunning lead vocal of guest Leah Calvert

(who also contributes some fine fiddle work) and the hypnotic flute of Bill Oglesby, supported by Tom Baker’s sinister chromatic banjo lines. We’re back in somewhat more traditional territory with “Somebody Touched Me,” distinguished by handclaps and enhanced by the twelve-voice “Somebody Touched Me’ Choir.”

The band’s style is well-suited to the Louvin Brothers’ Cold War period piece “The Great Atomic Power,” which the PHB arranges effectively using a quartet with the lead vocal traded from one singer to the next. Now about that back porch—one of this project’s more interesting aspects is that, while there’s no audience, it was recorded live on the back porch of fiddler/vocalist Andrew Heaton with a relatively simple mic setup reminiscent of that used by the band on stage. Listen for the birds singing before the first guitar chord of the title cut. These ambient sounds are a low-key presence throughout the recording, adding to its quirky charm.

The spiritual “You Don’t Knock” is familiar to bluegrass audiences primarily



through the 1984 recording by the New Grass Revival, and the PHB honors that band’s pioneering spirit while making the song their own, with Michael Paynter and Josh Erwin’s typically tasty mandolin and guitar work. “Cold Jordan” is the second cut to feature Oglesby’s flute. “This World Can’t Stand Long (For It Is Too Full of Hate)” is a seldom-heard selection from the catalog of Roy Acuff, memorable for its odd timing and catchy chorus.

Another guest vocalist, Jessica Horwitz, is heard to great effect on the southern Gospel-flavored “I Wonder How John Felt (When He Baptized Jesus).” The band works up to a fever pitch on the driving “There’s Something Going on in the Graveyard (Like You Ain’t Never Seen)” with its arresting falsetto harmony vocal. If anybody was wondering if the PHB had a sense of humor, I believe that question is answered by the presence of the final cut, “Like a Prayer,” which is not actually a gospel song at all but a cover of the early Madonna hit. Leah Calvert delivers another powerhouse lead vocal and I found myself coming back to this track over and over.

As I said in my review of “Chaff Harvest,” this recording is not for those who insist on strict adherence to the traditional bluegrass model. For those with open ears and a willingness to be engaged by the Packway Handle Band’s witty synthesis of diverse influences, there’s a lot here to like.

- Greg Earnest

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