

Playgrounds Magazine - February 2010



Packway Handle Band
What Are We Gonna Do Now?
Self Released
www.packwayhandleband.com

You know what I say? The Packway Handle Band can pretty much do whatever they want. The Athens-based band is already lauded for their tightly spun harmonies, material that includes a growing batch of their own extremely well-written songs, quirky cover choices and a string of impressive live performances. And with **What Are We Gonna Do Now?** they seem poised to step things up a notch and stand toe-to-toe with the best folk/bluegrass bands around. This is their fourth full length studio release (there was also a 2007 live EP) and their consistency and quality has to be reckoned with. This one, self-produced and recorded at fiddler Andrew Heaton's house, is a departure from their stage show, where the band crowds around twin condenser microphones, stepping up to add a lick or sing a line, because on this record, each member recorded their parts separately. A minor point perhaps, but to my ears, there's a different sense of space and warmth, a depth that comes from extra brushstrokes courtesy of sax and flute on a couple of tunes.

Heaton's wry songs, "What Is A Packway Handle?," which does absolutely nothing to answer that question (which is of course the point), and "I'm Glad You've Got My Priorities So Straight" provide the winking, smiling counterpoint to Michael Paynter's five contributions. Paynter's "Off My Knees" has surging bluesy riffs that explode into a chorus of layered harmonies, while "Outskirts" sports emotionally expressive lyrics that for some reason remind me of Dylan, circa Blood on the Tracks. Guitarist Josh Erwin chips in with three tracks including the instrumental "Horse vs. Technology." This release is easily their most accomplished and well-rounded and I'd put it up against anyone else in that vague Americana/folk/bluegrass category that people want to talk about.

What Are We Gonna Do Now? I don't know; just let me know when you do it.

Curtis Lynch

flagpole

February 2, 2010

Packway Handle Band

What Are They Gonna Do Now? The Unexpected.



Athens' own Packway Handle Band is not your run-of-the-mill group of string-pickers. Most nights, there's no "Shady Grove" or "Little Maggie" to be heard from these fellers.

Rather, the semi-bluegrass group has developed a knack for incorporating witty, and at times sarcastic, lyrics into its repertoire, while keeping the standard string-band setup of guitar, mandolin, banjo and fiddle in check. A five-man tag team steeped in both tradition and individuality, if there was ever a garage band that played bluegrass instead of rock, this is it.

According to guitarist Josh Erwin, the approach his band takes to its live sets often depends on the venue. Though Erwin, banjo player Tom Baker, fiddler Andrew Heaton, bassist Zach McCoy and mandolinist Michael Paynter have been known to engage in a fair amount of mischief when onstage at any of several local nightspots, they're also capable of playing a hot set of straightahead, old-school bluegrass.

Sometimes listeners who become accustomed to one approach may be more than a little surprised when venturing out to see the flipside. "A lot of (what we sound like) has to do with the audience we're going to be in front of," says Erwin. "We've done a lot of bluegrass competitions and festivals where you have to lean more toward the straightforward style. We'll have people come up after a show, like that, and say how much they enjoyed it. We'll usually

tell them to come check us out in Athens or Atlanta. Sometimes, when they do, I don't think they know quite what to make of the difference at first. We don't do a lot of stuff exactly like most straightforward bluegrass bands do with the 'brother' harmonies and that kind of thing. We're not as technically good and strict as a real, professional bluegrass band, nor do any of us strive to be in that kind of band where there's somewhat of a more limiting aspect to what you can and can't do."

It doesn't take long to figure out that the Packway Handle Band does not pride itself on conventionality or artistic limitations. Onstage, the group might unearth a sonorous Americana chestnut like the Louvin Brothers' "Great Atomic Power" or do a complete 180 by putting a string-band spin on the Violent Femmes' "American Music." On its latest release, *What Are We Gonna Do Now?*, the group makes noticeable use of its trio of songwriters/vocalists in Paynter, Heaton and Erwin. Paynter is more prone to pen witty, self-deprecating songs like "Walking Disaster," the narrator of which is "an accident that stopped waiting to happen, a total wreck" and "a toxic waste leak in your neighborhood creek" all rolled into one. Heaton also reveals himself as an appreciator of droll, somewhat snarky lyricism when singing "I never wanted to be a rock 'n' roll star, and I never wanted to own the most exclusive titty bar," on "I'm Glad You Got My Priorities So Straight." Erwin's songs tend to venture more into story-song balladry as heard on the harmony-laden "Lord Baltimore," also from the new release.

Listening to *What Are We Gonna Do Now?* you might think you finally have the Packway Handle Band pigeonholed. Then, out of nowhere, comes a brief, unexpected saxophone interlude provided by frequent guest Handleman and Knockouts member Bill 'The Pump' Oglesby. Do these guys really enjoy pulling our legs as much as it might seem?

"We've been described as both a 'bluegrass band with punk rock influences' and 'a band liked by people who don't even like bluegrass'," says Erwin. "To me, and I think to the other guys, too, we don't really sound that much different than a straight bluegrass band. There's just some stuff we do that sets us apart—like "The Pump," for instance. He's a great sit-in sax guy who has also come out onstage in red, patent leather panties and bra over a fishnet body suit to sing 'Happy Birthday' to my sister at one of our shows. You never know what to expect, and that's just part of the fun."

Michael Andrews

BN band to watch

■ BY DAVE HIGGS

“Sinner, you better get ready...”

THE PACKWAY HANDLE BAND of Athens, GA



Photo by Jessica Horwitz

“Sinner, you better get ready. Oh, you better get ready... hallelujah!”

The tune is from the 1937 Monroe Brothers’ songbag, but the delivery is all 21st century. The Packway Handle Band sings it with fire and brimstone, bringing the audience to the veritable brink of the pit of hell. “SINNER, you better get REH-ah-dee. Time’s a comin’ when the sinner must die.”

The Athens, Georgia quintet has already ink-stamped some audience members’ foreheads: “(Sinner)” reads the stamp, after the tune’s official name, “(Sinner) You Better Get Ready.” The crowd is feeling it now, from the top

of their faithless heads to the soles of their commandment-breaking feet. The abyss begins to open before their eyes as fiddler Andrew “The Heatwave” Heaton steps up to the group’s trademark two-condenser-mic setup. “Here’s the sound of sin,” he rasps with sternness that could provoke an atheist into speaking in tongues, launching into a screeching, otherworldly, dunk-me-in-the-river-right-now solo.

“Sinner, you better get ready.” For almost five minutes the band warns, chides and pleads, with Michael Paynter’s bluesy mandolin accentuating the melody, Tom Baker’s banjo driving a stake through the heart of disbelief; Josh “Caesar Frankenstein” Erwin’s guitar adding a righteous rhythmic bounce; and Zach McCoy’s bass pushing the song to its inevitable conclusion. “Fire and ash will soon descend... Watch out, sinner, ‘cause you’re facing your end.” The Heatwave’s lead vocals crackle with compassion for the lost. The crowd is spellbound. A night of frivolity and revelry has morphed into an old-time East Texas brush arbor meeting. One thing is obvious to all: The Packway Handle Band is not your father’s bluegrass band.

Fortunately, Packway Handle is a merciful group, not about to leave its audience in gut-wrenching despair after the dire sermon. “There once was a duck and I named him Earl,” The Heatwave croons to a dirge-like melody, “but then I found out that Earl was a girl.” The mood instantly lightens with “Earl the Duck,” a clever tune about a duck’s unusual predicament. The plot thickens when Earl the girl falls for a drake named Lady Luck. Both are uncomfortable with the whole thing, but instead of just reversing their names, they each decide to have a sex change operation! The audience hangs on every word as the song builds to a thunderous climax, with gorgeous four-part harmonies and a chorus that sounds vaguely reminiscent of a minor version of “Arkansas Traveler.”

In a high lonesome world rife with bands that sound frighteningly alike, the Packway Handle Band stands alone. After toying with names like “Loby McGillicuty & the Radius of Destruction,” the band settled on its current moniker when a friend, in a burst of alcohol-induced inspiration, blurted out “PACKWAY HANDLE!” during a show, apropos of nothing at all. The year was



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The Packway Handle Band live at Arts Guild Theatre, Greenock, Scotland

December 2008

Wednesday nights weren't made for football, I guess. I'd be more inclined to believe they were made to allow for people to attend goofball bluegrass shows. One such show I did witness was that of the Packway Handle Band, in the Arts Guild Theatre, Greenock.

Upon their arrival on stage, the immediate talking point - at least in my mind - was the standard bass. A bluegrass band with no double-bass, you say?! That's not right! Facetious remarks aside, the band romped through "All the Time in the World". The band's first impression hinted at a very traditional bluegrass show, with gusto. However, this wasn't to be the case all night. Bassist Zach McCoy cut a lonely figure by the wall, not contributing any vocals but playing away like a sulking schoolgirl. Meanwhile, the remaining four were huddled around the microphone, baffling this reviewer with splendid harmonies that owe as much to the Beach Boys as to Appalachian mountain singers. Each band member excelled on their own instrument, and their first set closed in fitting bluegrass style; a tribute to Bill Monroe.

A second set would shortly follow, allowing the band to deliver another term of slapstick bluegrass, so masterfully delivered, each and every face in the room had the visage of a botched Botox victim. This was only exacerbated by "Earl the Duck", a loving tale of gender confused duck. Fiddler Andrew Heaton's vocals really milked this song. From here it only got more and more absurd. "Satan's in Space" couldn't be further from traditional bluegrass song matter, but this is where part of the Packway Handle band's appeal lies. While adopting a serious attitude to their playing, the band are almost self-deprecating in both their lyrics and their delivery. Just as I thought the night had reached its peak, McCoy departs the room, and returns with the crowning touch. A big ol' double-bass! The band signed off with "Sinner, You Better Get Ready", to a thorough and deserved ovation.

The Packway Handle Band are not your typical bluegrass band. Drawing on influences as far astray as Romania and Mexico, they have certainly come a long way from their roots in Athens, Georgia, and they are all the better for it.



January 2008

About a Duck

Packway Handle Band experiences surprise when song that almost didn't make album becomes fan favorite - all because of a female duck named Earl

Listen to the new Packway Handle Band album once and you won't be able to get "Earl the Duck" out of your head. "People keep saying that, and that's good," said Andrew Heaton, who plays fiddle and sings in the bluegrass band. British broadcaster Bob Harris recently raved about the ear-wormy duck song on his BBC Radio 2 show. He reportedly commented, "Isn't that one of the best things you've ever heard?"

Once I had a duck

And I named him Earl

But then I found out

That Earl was a girl.

I thought it wouldn't matter

And anyway. . .

Earl would always come to me whatever I would say.

Amy Heaton, Andrew's sister, started the tribute to Earl after she heard a bit of a song about a duck during a bluegrass jam in Southwest Virginia. "She got the first couple of verses," Andrew Heaton said. "She got distracted and moved onto something else." Andrew Heaton wasn't willing to let the tale of gender identity crisis and love go by the wayside. He finished the lyrics. While Heaton liked the finished product he was nervous about sharing it with the other band members. "There's always some apprehension when you bring a song in," he said. Heaton admitted it doesn't make any sense to sweat it. "When you bring something to a group of guys nobody has a response," Heaton explained. Maybe someone said something along the lines of "Yeah, that'll be good," he said. Usually, though, Heaton doesn't find out how the band members feel about a new number until they start rehearsing it and one guy or another begins to complain. "It's mostly passive aggressive," Heaton said.

"We are a democracy which has its pros and cons," said Tom Baker who plays banjo and sings in the Packway Handle Band. Although the band members gave "Earl the Duck" a thumb's up, the song almost didn't make it onto the new CD. While working on the album, they spent a day tweaking the song. Heaton's girlfriend didn't exactly jump up and down upon hearing the fruits of their labor. "She sort of listened to it and didn't say anything," Heaton said. Luckily, the next day the Packway Handle Band figured out how to make the song work. Heaton liked the song so much, he recorded another version for his upcoming electronic/indie rock/pop/ "slightly strange" solo CD "A(n) simulated complaint." that'll come out this spring. "In the end," he admitted, "I think I like the Packway version better."

The band coined their unusual name, according to Heaton, when one night a friend with Tourette Syndrome yelled out "Packway!" "Then there was modification from there because they were drinking a handle of whiskey," Heaton said. The band - which also includes Josh Erwin, who plays guitar and sings, Michael Paynter, who plays mandolin and sings and bass player Zach McCoy - formed in 2001. Everyone but Heaton went to a Kennesaw high school together. Heaton went to high school in South Carolina which makes him a bit of a Packway Handle outsider but that's OK by him. "I like to feel left out," he said. "I can't imagine if I still had to be hanging out with people I went to high school with." The band's unique covers, like their version of the Violent Femmes' "American Music" and an arrangement of Madonna's "Like a Prayer," might wrinkle bluegrass purists but it also draws in listeners who aren't already fans of the genre. The guys play around two tightly-spaced condenser mics - not as a nod to how old-timers did it but because they like the way it lets them feed off one another's energy. "We're really packed in tight around those mics," Baker said. "I personally really like the way it sounds. You lose so much with amps."

But there tends to be a lot of maneuvering to get the right person close to the mic at the right time. "You've got to be careful to step up and not take a fiddle bow to the eye." Baker said. Baker once got jabbed into the upper part of his ear with a bow, which pushed his head to the side in an unnatural position. "He had some momentum on the bow," Baker said of a to-remain-nameless band mate. "It was a lot more alarming for him than me."

Following the release party Saturday, the guys will start packing for a European tour that begins with performances at the Celtic Connections Festival and includes other shows in Belgium, Holland, England and France. As exciting as that will be, Heaton has even bigger plans. "We intend to be the first bluegrass band to play in outer space," he said.

Packway Handle Band CD Release Party with Mountain Heart and Trampled by Turtles

Published in the Athens Banner-Herald on 011808

Get a handle on the Packway boys

January 2008

THE Packway Handle Band, described as one of the world's top bluegrass bands, fly in to Scotland this month to headline their own show at Celtic Connections in Glasgow (Friday, January 25, at Oran Mor, with Harem Scarem).

And music lovers in Perthshire are in for a treat as the five-piece, described as "white hot", have kept a promise to play here as well.

They play the Birnam Arts Centre on Saturday, January 26, the evening after their Celtic Connections gig.

UK audiences have been treated to a great diversity of roots music talent in recent times as interest in Americana has peaked to new heights.

Young, energetic and multi-talented bands such as Old Crow Medicine Show and Nickel Creek – both from bluegrass and mountain music backgrounds – led the initial charge and a new wave, including The Hunger Mountain Boys and The Avett Brothers followed to keep the momentum going.

The Packway Handle Band are seen as the latest act to be turning on the masses.

The UK tour has been organised by the Brookfield-Knights agency – the same promoters who brought the hugely successful Master Musicians from The Crooked Road show to Scotland last year.

Bren Haldane of the Brookfield- Knights agency told the PA: "We put that package on in Birnam too and it attracted a big turnout, all of whom fell in love with the young bluegrass band, No Speed Limit.

"Well, The Packway Handle Band are definitely in the same league as them, except, they are much more experienced and have a better- established following in America."

Bren explained that it is seven years since the five-piece exploded on to the US scene from their base in Athens, Georgia. Since then, their reputation has continued to grow and, in the intervening period, they have shone at major gatherings and been finalists on three consecutive occasions at the prestigious Telluride Bluegrass Festival – probably the single most important event of its kind.

"Just like many of their contemporaries, much of their appeal rests in an ability to bring a fresh vitality to the performance while honouring the past. In the process, they have built a huge "teens and twenties" fan base as well as keeping old-school aficionados happy.

"The band's signature sound is based around tight three and four-part vocal harmonies and crisp playing, bolstered by an impressive brand of original material and well-considered covers."
