

Sloppy, Fast, Anarchic ... Bluegrass

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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When Eric Mardis was a teenager, he dreamed the way most adolescent boys dream: “I totally wanted to be a rock star,” he said in a phone interview, “a cross between [Deep Purple’s] Ritchie Blackmore and [Metallica’s] Kirk Hammett. ”

These days Mardis – who is now 33 – has a rock band and a jazz quartet, but his primary job is not at all what he imagined. He speaks of it almost as if he were at a 12-step meeting – somewhat shamefully: “I play banjo in a neo-whatever bluegrass band.”

That would be Split Lip Rayfield, a pickin’-and-grinnin’ outfit for people who like rock music. The band will be playing Saturday afternoon at the River Roots Live festival.

It’s not that Kansas-based outfit – until recently a quartet, presently a trio – makes any attempt to fuse the two styles. Split Lip Rayfield is to bluegrass what punk was to rock and roll – a sloppy, fast, anarchic dismantling and celebration. Mardis calls it the “hack and slash” approach.

Mardis said his outfit is “a rock band with acoustic instruments.” But he abandoned that concise description and offered a more colorful one: “bastardized hillbilly punk whatever the mess it is.” That “mess” manifests itself in the way people describe the band – it’s been called “thrashgrass” – and the range of people Split Lip Rayfield has opened for, from Del McCoury to Nashville Pussy.

On its fourth record, last year’s *Should Have Seen It Coming*, the band made a conscious effort at something more traditional and polished – “the kindest to the ear,” said Mardis, who has been with the group for eight years.

A casual listen says “bluegrass,” but closer inspection reveals a decidedly contemporary perspective on the traditional form. References to Batman, Skoal, and BMWs dot “Redneck Tailgate Dream,” while another song is titled “A Little More Cocaine Please.”

Lyrics aside, though, it’s not clear from *Should Have Seen It Coming* where that punk-bluegrass reputation comes from.

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“It’s just because we play fast,” Mardis claimed.

It’s more than that, though. Consider:

- The band might be playing “square” music, but its members still consider themselves rock-and-rollers. “The live show is about energy exchange,” Mardis said. If the crowd is alive and lively, he said, the band feeds off it, and out come the “big rocker poses.”
- Split Lip Rayfield’s members don’t come from bluegrass backgrounds. The group’s origins are in an alternative-rock outfit called Scroat Belly. And Mardis plays banjo by necessity; when the group invited him to jam, his natural instrument – the guitar – was already covered. “Bring a banjo,” his future bandmates told him. As a result, his technique isn’t exactly Earl Scruggs. “Normal bluegrass players are aghast when they see me play,” Mardis said. “There’s definitely a lot of technical ability in our band, but it’s not Alison Krauss & Union Station.” Members might not know the classic bluegrass parts, so they’re considered outsiders in the bluegrass community.
- The band’s bassist, Jeff Eaton, plays a self-made instrument fashioned from a gas tank, a neck he carved, and weed-eater line. He also plays a mean kazoo, Mardis said.
- While its music is certainly part of the bluegrass universe, the actual songs are written by the band’s members. You’re not going to hear traditional numbers at a Split Lip Rayfield show, but “tongue-and-cheek-ass bluegrass songs we made up,” delivered as though the world depended on it.
- It’s not even clear that Mardis *likes* bluegrass. He listens to bluegrass only occasionally and in the car prefers the classic-hard-rock sounds of Purple, Rainbow, and Dio.

So what draws an aspiring rock guitarist to this backwoods music? “The addiction is the speed and accessibility,” Mardis said. “It’s massively satisfying.”

Even though Split Lip Rayfield veered toward the mainstream with *Should Have Seen It Coming*, the banjo player promises a return to the band’s roots with its next CD, targeted for a spring or summer 2006 release. “It’ll be our most aggressive,” he said.