

over yonder

Yonder Mountain String Band makes rockin' bluegrass music

RODNEY WILSON | CIN WEEKLY CONTRIBUTOR

The music starts – a deep feedback swells and sustains, a simple melody emerges as reverbed strings are plucked and echo off into the distance, a rhythm builds in muted chords. The sound builds to a swell and climaxes with – a banjo? A mandolin? Is that an upright bass?

Wait a second – is this bluegrass? And more to the point, can I actually be enjoying this?

These are the sounds of the Yonder Mountain String Band, a quartet of young men who craft bluegrass tunes that appeal to everyone from hardcore fans of pickin' and grinnin' to indie kids. And, yeah, it's quite likely you'd really like their music.

AN AGGRESSIVE MUSIC

"None of us grew up with traditional bluegrass," says Jeff Austin, mandolin player and singer for the Colorado-based band, which also includes Ben Kaufmann (bass, vocals), Dave Johnston (banjo, vocals) and Adam Aijala (guitar, vocals). "In fact, the earliest any of us might have heard a bluegrass artist would have been in our teens. We're children of the '80s, the remote control generation, so we listened to a lot of hair bands and a lot of pop, but also a lot of punk and a lot of heavier music."

While the choice to take up such a traditional form of music as bluegrass might not be an obvious one for rock-loving Midwesterners of the MTV generation, the draw was instinctual.

"For me, it's the aggressiveness of the music," Austin says. "The fact that you could, without amping everything up and having tons of equipment, get a bunch of guys together with one mic and create such an aggressive style of music. That immediately grabbed me. The stuff just moves so fast – even the waltzes have such an aggressive tone."

STICKING OUR NECKS OUT

"There is a core idea behind what bluegrass music is, but you can branch off in so many different ways and directions and still keep that original intention," says Austin, explaining another big draw bluegrass has for him. "There's a lot of breathing room, though you will meet a lot of hardcore traditionalists who see a plug and just aren't interested. But it's supplied us with a lot of freedom."



The Yonder Mountain String Band – Dave Johnston, Jeff Austin, Ben Kaufmann and Adam Aijala – will be performing Thursday at the Madison Theater in Covington.

Yonder Mountain String Band used this freedom to push the boundaries of bluegrass with its most recent self-titled album, a defiantly nontraditional take on bluegrass music. Working with rock producer Tim Rothrock, the man behind the boards for such albums as Beck's *Mellow Gold* and Elliot Smith's *XO*, the band recorded an album that adds electric guitar and drums in with the banjo and mandolin.

"We said, 'Let's let our childhood influences come out on this record,'" explains Austin of the album's rock undercurrents. "So we'd say, 'Why don't you play electric guitar on this, Adam? Like a rock guitar solo?' This record, from the beginning, was about letting our minds run and see where they'd take us. We went into it to deviate, to push ourselves out of the box a little bit."

The results, Austin admits, were far from the more traditional sounds of Yonder Mountain String Band's previous albums, so the band expected to lose quite a few of its fans – and was both gracious and shocked when the opposite occurred.

"We were fully prepared for a lot of people to really hate it. But some of our older, more hardcore fans who don't keep their opinions to themselves and let you know – they love it,"

he says. "Even though we were sticking our necks out there, it seemed to work and people got it."

QUEEN CITY TIES

Yonder Mountain String Band's show in Covington on Thursday is more than just another tour stop for Austin – the Cincinnati area holds special memories for the former CCM student.

"It was my token year of college, and I was there for less than a year – the experience was not where I needed to go, but I learned things in that year that I still use every time I take the stage," he says of his time in Cincinnati, where he studied voice and musical theater.

"It was '92-'93, and at that time I was aware of a very small section of bluegrass. But I remember there was Calhoun Hall, and a band called the Acousticats was playing downstairs, and I went down in the basement with 20 to 30 people and listened to them play. And that was one of those 'aha' moments – realizing that this was what this music sounds and looks like when it's played live.

"I have history in Cincinnati – a chunk of my life was lived there. It's a great town."

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

A popular touring band whose live shows are enjoyed from coast to coast, the Yonder Mountain String Band has spent more than its fair share of time on the road. Jeff Austin names five things that suck about life on tour.

1-3. "Not having your own bed, your own kitchen or your own bathroom – the last one is my favorite thing about being home."

4. "Airport luggage check-in – I know it's a pain for everyone, but just once you should hook up with a group and fly with them when they're traveling with gear."

5. "Really bad restaurants."

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: Yonder Mountain String Band

WHERE: Madison Theater, 730 Madison Ave., Covington

WHEN: 9:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 22

PRICE: \$20

PARKING: Lots along Seventh and Eighth streets within a block of the venue.

CONTACT: 859-491-2444, www.madisontheateronline.com or www.yondermountain.com