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Blues band makes Southern melodies — from New York

By Ming Rodrigues
 Emerald Entertainment Reporter

A band named Blues Traveler evokes images of mellowed men with their beat-up guitars in tow, crooning about the good ol' days in smoky, sleepy, small-town dives.
 Then out spring four, post-adolescent Brooklyn guys with their pricey music degrees, calling themselves the Blues Traveler and proceeding to prove their point by packing the New York nightclub scene and releasing a self-titled debut album that's on the cutting-edge of some pretty ferocious blues.

'We could be very melodic and make traditional chord progressions, things that were very planned out, but overall we'd play the blues.'

—John Popper

"Blues Traveler wants to make music real again," said promoter Bill Graham, who discovered the youthful talents and wasn't surprised when the band earned encores opening recently for Jerry Garcia and the Allman Brothers.

"They are simply the best young band I've seen in New York — they're fresh, they rattle their bones and they make you feel good," said the man who manages such acts as the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and the Neville Brothers. "They're from the same realm as the (Grateful) Dead in that they'll always want to be close to the streets."

Even their critics recognize the resemblance. Declared *Rolling Stone* magazine: "They've tapped into a Grateful Dead spirit: improvisational, loose, a little trippy. They're a band you can see again and again."

Comparisons aside, these are four young men — Bobby Sheehan, Chan Kinchla, John Popper and Brendan Hill — all in their early 20s, who just three

years after coming together are now a force of their own.

These guys throw youthful rawness to the wind with their brand of hard-driving blues which one reviewer described as "kicking the '60s to the '90s."

Saturday night you can judge for yourself just how good these guys are when the EMU Cultural Forum presents the Blues Traveler at the Eugene Hilton Ballroom at 8.

Tickets are \$8 for students and \$12 for general admission, and can be purchased at the EMU Main Desk.

Like all fledgling bands, Blues Traveler had its humble beginnings.

After high school, the guys moved to New York City where they paid their musical dues. They began as a bar band, playing for \$50 a night, until they felt confident enough to convince the owners for a share of the cover charge.

"We were just out of high school learning how to live on our own as well as be in a band," Kinchla said. "At 18 and 19, you can sleep on floors and wake up five hours later to hop a subway and get to your next gig — and love every minute of it."

David Graham, Bill Graham's son, caught the group at a Columbia University fraternity house gig and later at a live show at Barnard College Festival. He continued to check out their performances at local clubs before bringing their talent to the attention of his father.

The band, which earned a cameo role in the upcoming Oliver Stone *Doors* film, debunks the myth that music theory has nothing to do with playing the blues.

With the exception of Kinchla, who has no formal training, Popper, Sheehan and Hill all studied at both the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York and the Berklee School of Music.

All four members attended Princeton High School in New Jersey, where they began to form bonds that were "like family."

To pin down the music of the Blues Traveler would be a little difficult, for their sound is distinct, melding inflections of the blues, jazz, metal, Jimi Hen-



Blues Traveler, hailing from New York, brings its own brand of tunes to the Eugene Hilton Ballroom Saturday night at 8. From left to right are Bobby Sheehan, Chan Kinchla, John Popper and Brendan Hill.

drix and Paul Butterfield. The guys share a reverence for pushing out the boundaries with their diverse styles. Ambition-wise, they plan to be the first band in space.

Popper credits the formal training he, Hill and Sheehan had for enabling the band to remake all the rules.

"Brendan and I had a music teacher in high school who was a real mutant in the best sense," he said. "We could be very melodic and make traditional chord progressions, things that were very planned out, but overall we'd play the blues."

"When the band first got together, especially after Bob, who's a real Deadhead, joined we'd just jam and mess around. Chan and Brendan are sort of disciples of Zeppelin and I was always a Jimi Hendrix guy. Bob's bass playing, well, he just knows how to melt one song into another."

Popper, a bear of a guy who stashes his arsenal of harps in a bush-camp bannoler and who has appeared on record-

ment capable of complex single note riffs that rival the lyrical quality of the saxophone.

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—Chan Kinchla

ings with David Sanborn, is known to bring harp blowing to new dimensions of virtuosity.

In his hands, it is said the harmonica transcends its usual role of soulful noise-maker and becomes a legitimate instru-

Proving a solid backdrop to Popper's harp are Kinchla on guitar, Sheehan on bass and London-born Brendan on drums.

Opening for the Blues Traveler will be Eugene's own Nine Days Wonder.

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