

Andrew Bird does it all—forward and backward

The eclectic musician loops instrumentals together, weaving an electronic orchestra in his live shows

BY AARON BURKHALTER
FREELANCE REPORTER

When Andrew Bird takes the stage, he slings his guitar over his back and wields a worn violin in his hand. He holds his violin like a ukulele and begins plucking a

pizzicato syncopation. He steps on a pedal on the ground and the syncopation continues while he adds another syncopation over the top of it. Soon his looping device is cranking out layer upon layer of violin, creating a dense electronic orchestra to

back Bird's guitar, voice, glockenspiel and whistling.

It's a far cry from the music Bird created in the late 1990s. His first band, Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire, rode on the popular wave of the neo-swing movement, along with the popular East Coast swingers the Squirrel Nut Zippers. The five-piece Bowl of Fire cranked out antiquated gypsy swing and blues with Bird's virtuoso fiddling, melodic voice and abstract lyrics. His traditional sound accompanied songs about cloning sheep and Etch-A-Sketches.

But Bird's ambitions reached further than Bowl of Fire and the American-roots music that it championed. Bird found himself constricted by working with a consistent group. A band playing the same kind of parts every time pinned down his songs and restricted his experimentation.

"I needed to indulge myself again and let the songs breathe a little more," Bird said in a phone interview.

Bird bought a farm in Illinois to give himself some stretching room for his music to grow. He started working with the looping equipment that would become the cornerstone of his live sound and began forming a new style without the constraints of a regular band. Bird has almost exclusively played all the music on

his most recent recordings. With the exception of rotating drummers, the instrumentation, both on stage and on CD, is all his own.

"It's nice to have total control," Bird said. "There's more chance that your music will end up weirder."

The results are, in fact, weird, and that's a compliment. The music on his newest album, "The Mysterious Production of Eggs," defies conventional definition. The ambient layers of violin accompanied by Bird's eccentric lyrics create an unusual world.

The music draws from so many different musical traditions that it is impossible to pinpoint a dominant influence; it spans sounds from folk to Indian to rock. The sound is as twisted and compelling as the lyrics it accompanies.

Bird's eccentric approach to lyrics may be the only thing that remains from his Bowl of Fire days. His lyrics are sprinkled with what he

calls "fake palindromes." A palindrome is a word or phrase that is spelled the same way backward and forward, such as "race car" or "never odd or even."

"I was looking at real palindromes and noticed that they kind of have a similar cadence to them," Bird said.

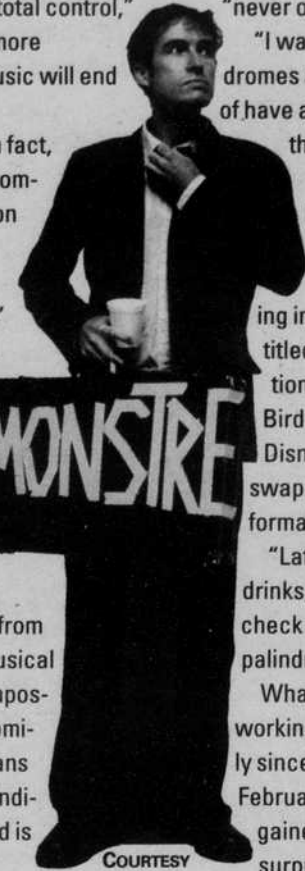
Bird starts writing his lyrics by making strange vowel and consonant patterns, bringing meaning in after the fact. In the song titled after his lyrical motivation, "Fake Palindromes," Bird sings, "My dewy-eyed Disney bride what tried swapping your blood with formaldehyde."

"Late at night after a couple drinks, who's going to bother to check whether that's a real palindrome or not?" Bird said.

Whatever Bird is doing, it's working. He has toured endlessly since the release of "Eggs" in February. In the last year he gained a sudden and surprising following in Europe.

"It grows very quickly over there," Bird said. He has had no problem gaining media attention on the other side of the Atlantic. "Whereas it's taken me eight years to gain an

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