

Talking with the trio later, I mention some of the highlights from the set. Gerow, a handsome, dark-haired man in his mid-30s, contradicts his stage announcement, assuring me, "We do way gayer stuff than Duran Duran." He seems serious, precise and slightly guarded.

But not for long. As is often the case with the threesome, the other two members jump in and lighten things up. As bassist and resident optimist Mike "Cheddar" Schmitt laughs and conspicuously fingers his acoustic bass, percussionist Don "Blankenship" Henson throws his two cents in: "The Go-Go's tune is pretty gay!"

I argue that Duran Duran's hair and makeup rival even The Go-Go's on the gay icon scale.

The room erupts with hoots (you can tell these guys like to laugh), as Gerow shoots back, "Yeah, but you're not a group of big, burly homos!"

Big, burly virtuosos

For all of their playful openness, Sneakin' Out is more than a novelty act providing dance tunes for Portland's queer community. With a new CD of original material, *Train Wreck*, and a growing fan base, the trio's best-kept secret might be that inside a kitschy concept (new grass meets new wave), a goofy band name and a collection of tongue-in-cheek covers (Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" segueing into AC/DC's "Highway to Hell") exist three serious artists with an uncommon sense of musicianship, keen ears and all the signs of a viable career in their near future.

It all started about a year and a half ago with a



"More straight people have come to the Dirty Duck since we started playing there"

—David Gerow



Sneakin' Out covers everything from Led Zep to Duran Duran

Pink Floyd cover and a moment of synchronicity.

The guys met in Flint, Mich., on a musical project. Henson and Schmitt lived in Portland. Gerow was about to find himself drawn to the Rose City and sharing a place with Schmitt.

Gerow and Schmitt began obsessively practicing as a mandolin/bass duo, learning covers and writing original compositions. Gerow offered 30-plus years of experience and depth playing a broad collection of musical genres and instruments; Schmitt found himself in the role of apprentice, learning to play the bass guitar on the fly.

And the two were off.

More for leisure than income, "Gerow & Schmitt" liked to play impromptu mini-sets in Southeast Portland, on buses and sidewalks, at gas stations and restaurants. Pick a place, walk in, start playing, have fun—their unspoken mottoes.

"We hadn't really considered trying to make a living at it," remembers Gerow. "We were just getting our kicks playing music for people, and the response was good, so we just kept doing it. Because we were unamplified...we could take it to some unlikely places."

One such place became a regular gig. Eugene Gray, owner of Division Street eatery Eugenios, liked what he heard so much that he asked the pair to come back every Saturday.

At one of those performances, longtime friend and musical collaborator Henson jumped into the fray.

"Eugene is big into music and encourages people to participate," recalls Gerow. "So he threw a box of miscellaneous percussion stuff at Don, who found something and started in with the cash register beginning to 'Money' by Pink Floyd, and we joined in. It felt and sounded like we'd been rehearsing for weeks."

A pianist/keyboardist since childhood, 38-year-old Henson doesn't think of himself first

and foremost as a percussionist. But with a lifetime of music in his bones, the versatile musician intuitively filled the space and transformed Gerow & Schmitt from a duo to a dynamic trio with infinite possibilities.

His approach to percussion is more that of an inventor: he tinkers with his sonic tool kit, making mistakes and then incorporating those mistakes into his performance. Using the obscure (glockenspiel) and the mundane (a manual typewriter), Henson contributes a distinct personality and sensibility to the trio's sound.

"I'm the most extreme of the three of us," he says. "I really got heavily into John Cage and people like that, people who would find things that weren't necessarily musical and turn them into music...it taught me to hear things."

With experimental artists like Brian Eno, John Cage and Laurie Anderson as influences, Henson brings an appetite for the avant-garde to Sneakin' Out's pure Ameri-



Don Henson is all about fun when it comes to percussion

cana sound. He also brings a deep love of rock 'n' roll to the mix, with a particular bent toward 1970s guitar gods (Zeppelin, Yes, King Crimson). His bandmates bow down to similar idols: Ozzy Osbourne, Iron Maiden, Zappa and Kiss. ("I joined the Kiss Army," laughs Gerow, referring to the glam rockers' fan club.)

Rock roots give rise to a signature sound

You name it, if a guitar is involved, Sneakin' Out loves it. Heavy metal. Glam rock. Classic rock. But it doesn't stop there. Toss in a healthy admiration for classical music and traditional American compositions. Then consider the music that a gay man bar-hopping in the 1980s and 1990s inhales: show tunes, disco, synth-pop. Now you're beginning to understand how a trio consisting of mandolin, acoustic bass and percussion can put together a set list that includes Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean," the Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black" and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

To make things even more interesting, Sneakin' Out has recently begun introducing improvisation into their live performances, allowing the songs to play the band, in the moment, unrehearsed.

With Gerow's virtuosic mastery of the mandolin and with a treasure chest of free-pickin' influences, he has the ability to bring Sneakin' Out far out to the edge and back, with long, winding solos and the mind-set that a mistake is not just inevitable, but invited.

All of this makes for an eclectic and unpredictable show that presents its own set of challenges. Will the gay audience give the band room to experiment and jam? If Sneakin' Out only puts original tunes on their records, will they sell? And how will the press portray the trio?

Music writers are infamous for tacking lazy labels onto artists—it makes their job easier and caters to the short attention spans of their readers. Read enough album reviews and you will find the strongest artists deconstructed, discounted and dismissed. (Local indie rockers Quasi? Flaming Lips derivatives. The prolific lyricism of Bright Eyes' Conor Oberst? Just another Bob Dylan wannabe. Et cetera.) Try to put Sneakin' Out in a box and you'll inevitably end up contradicting yourself.

Because while their approach to music might resonate with fans of more acoustic-

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