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oriented "jam bands" (e.g., The String Cheese Incident) and eclectic jazz-influenced Americana (e.g., David Grisman), don't mistake Sneakin' Out for hippie noodlers. Though their live repertoire reflects back many nights of debauchery in leather bars, and Pink Martini's Thomas Lauderdale is a big fan—don't pigeon-hole the trio as a gay act for a gay crowd.

Riding the wave of sudden fame

The truth is, it's easy to imagine Sneakin' Out clicking with all kinds of audiences. Put them on a bill at Oregon Country Fair or Pride or Pick-a-Thon, and chances are the audience will respond enthusiastically. Watching the trio live, you can feel their potential to grow beyond dive bars and local shows.

Yes, the queer community is well-represented in the Sneakin' Out fan base. And yes, being gay is an integral part of each musician's identity. They are out and proud to be. But the band's particular brand of American music transcends sexuality. The music stands on its own.

"You run the risk of turning off a large audience with a label like 'gay,'" explains Gerow. "And it's not that that's right or wrong, it's that it doesn't matter. Why factor it in at all? If we were Jewish, you wouldn't say 'Jewish trio.' If we were animal enthusiasts you wouldn't say 'the animal enthusiasts trio.'"

"Right," adds Henson. "It's not Sir Homosexual Elton John."

Catch Sneakin' Out at one of these upcoming shows:

- 8 p.m. Sept. 17, Mississippi Studios, 3939 N. Mississippi St. Performing Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band with the Billy Shears Orchestra. \$8.

- 6 to 8 p.m. Sept. 22, Imbibe, 2229 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

- 8 to 10 p.m. Sept. 23, Emanon Café, 1000 N.W. 17th Ave.

- 9 p.m. to midnight Sept. 24, Mockcrest Tavern, 3435 N. Lombard St.



Schmitt (left) hams while Gerow jams at Gail's Dirty Duck

"More straight people have come to the Dirty Duck since we started playing there," continues Gerow. "This one couple saw us at

Mississippi Pizza, went to our Web site and saw that we were playing the Duck. They called down there for directions and the wife asked [Gerow feigns a timid falsetto], 'I guess this is a leather, gay, um, leather bar.' And the guy who answered assured her, y'know, 'Well, if you don't have a problem with homosexuals then you won't have a problem coming here.' So here was this couple from Fairfax, Va., of all places, just hootin' and hollering, saying, 'We love this place!'"

Three gay musicians taking the earliest traditions of American music—blues, folk, jazz—are making their own original sound, referencing their inspirations and experiences through original creations and off-the-cuff improvisation.

In crafting their songs and their set lists, Sneakin' Out is conscious both of their muse and of what their audience craves. But as the trio grows and changes, can they bring their community with them and still stay true to their artistic vision?

As they enter their second year as a musical unit, with only one recording under their belt, Gerow, Henson and Schmitt quickly find themselves struggling with the dichotomy of wanting to make music a career and wanting to carve out an original, honest path for themselves.

"Recently I've heard that a lot of the jamming/improvising that we do...[is] losing people," says Gerow. "It concerns me. As any artist will tell you, the exciting part is when the music changes."

"We feel like we provide plenty of, y'know, nostalgic moments," Gerow continues. "We play the songs people like, we play them in a different way so it's refreshing and it's a little bit of a challenge to name that tune. But it's a little bit of a touchy thing...you don't want to come off like you're some sort of music machine."

"We're people, we're expressing ourselves, and it ain't always going to jibe with every-

body," he says. "But if you don't have an audience, what's your music for? There's a balance that's hard to achieve and maintain."

What their music is for

Back at the Dirty Duck on Sunday night, it's time for the band's second set. They play a tune you can't quite place, but you feel a wave of nostalgia pass through you. You are surrounded by people—gay and straight, bears and bulldykes—and you feel right at home. As your conscious mind tries to follow the melody and understand the song and the musicians, you realize the message coming through the music: Let go. Have fun. Don't let anyone tell you can't do it.

Depending on who you are, Sneakin' Out may challenge your preconceptions about music or your idea of a good time. But there is a choice to be made. Three musicians, masters of their instruments, intent on finding joy for themselves are offering a gift to their audience. Now all you have to do is accept. **J**

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