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Sneak Attack

Acoustic trio surprises us again with an all-original opus

It's easy to classify Sneakin' Out as "that bear band" because, c'mon, can you name one other bear band in existence? Not counting Disneyland, that is.

But that label fails to capture the unique artistry of the trio, which became a local phenomenon a couple of years ago for its crowd-pleasing interpretations of classic rock tunes like Metallica's "Enter Sandman" (cleverly sprinkled with a dash of The Chordettes' "Mr. Sandman") and The Rolling Stones' "Paint It, Black" (blended with snippets from "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony).

Now the guys are back with their first all-original effort, *Opera Tuna Teen Ox*, possibly the goofiest album title since REO Speedwagon's *You Can Tune a Piano but You Can't Tuna Fish*. The band's press materials describe the disc far better than I can: "Conceived as a soundtrack to a movie which doesn't exist, OTTO showcases the band's...signature post-apocalyptic electro-acoustic throwdown."

Here's a brief introduction to the members of this distinctly Portland act.



From left, Mike "Cheddar" Schmitt, David Gerow and Don Henson composed the soundtrack to *Opera Tuna Teen Ox*, a movie that doesn't exist.

David Gerow

Age: 38

Hometown: Flint, Mich.

Musical background: As a child Gerow would go to school early to practice on the piano, which led to a career as a bar musician starting at the age of 18. He switched to mandolin in 2000.

Album that changed his life: *The David Grisman Quintet* (1976). "No lie—from the beginning of the first song, I knew that was my music."

Memorable road experience: As the tuxedo-clad opening act for k.d. lang and Thomas Lauderdale in June 2004 at the Schnitz. "When the stage lights finally came on, we knew that it was packed, but we could only see the first few rows. None of us knew how this was going to go over. We were still unsure as to whether or not the praise we were getting was like, 'My kid's the best actor in the play.' Not two measures into 'Penny Lane,' the crowd erupted with laughter, and I knew it was gonna be great."

Betcha didn't know: "I was on *The Tonight Show*." Gerow performed two songs backing country singer Clay Walker in 1994. Charlton Heston was also on the couch.

Don Henson

Age: 45

Hometown: Tigard

Musical background: Henson started playing piano at 5 but didn't pick up percussion until Sneakin' Out formed in 2003. "In the first year, it



Jim's Closet

BY JIM RADOSTA

was really hard when people would be like, 'Ah, this is amazing stuff' because I had no idea what I was doing! I have still horizons to go."

Albums that changed his life: Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention's *We're Only in It for the Money* (1968), Todd Rundgren's *Initiation* (1975) and David Bowie's *Low* (1977). "Those are the records that changed my perception of music, what being a musician is, all those things."

Memorable road experience: Just before a gig at McMinnville's Hotel Oregon, Henson happened to be standing on a veranda when "this Volkswagen EuroVan stopped, and I looked down and the passenger window was open. Clearly sitting on their dashboard was *our album*. It was just so random that I was even there to see it."

Betcha didn't know: In 1983 he and his partner, who was a priest, launched "Mass at the Time of AIDS" at Portland State University, which led to the formation of the HIV Day Center. "We had a lot of friends who had AIDS, and their families, the hospitals, no one would deal with them in a realistic way at all. We probably did that for at least 10 years. Martin Sheen came one time."

Mike "Cheddar" Schmitt

Age: 39

Hometown: Toutle Lake, Wash.

Musical background: Schmitt didn't get into music until the age of 28. He played drums, studying with jazz greats Carlton Jackson and Mel Brown, before switching to bass in 2003. "I'm the new kid on the block."

Album that changed his life: *Machine Head* by Deep Purple. "That's my first memory of an album that I just played over and over and made everybody sick."

Memorable road experience: Jamming with fiddler Joe Craven this summer at the High Sierra Music Festival in Quincy, Calif. "We have a recording of a couple of performances with him that were just mind-blowing. I can't stop thinking about that."

Betcha didn't know: While growing up on a farm near Mount St. Helens, Schmitt witnessed the 1980 eruption that killed 57 people, including infamous innkeeper Harry Truman. "We used to steal his boats when we were kids. He'd sit on the dock and cuss at us. Nobody really cared for him because he was so crotchety." jo

SNEAKIN' OUT celebrates the release of *Opera Tuna Teen Ox* 3 p.m. Aug. 20 at Music Millennium, 801 N.W. 23rd Ave.

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.