

One Nation Under

Diné trio returns, along with geek-rock Slats.

Welcome in the weekend one day early, and go out on Thursday night. There's something for everyone's musical taste, such as **Blackfire** at the WOW Hall, along with Eugene's **Basic Assumption**. If you missed Blackfire's Eugene debut in May, now's your chance to catch up. This trio hails from Flagstaff, Ariz., and are members of the Navajo nation; in their language they are Diné. The two brothers and a sister — Clayson, Klee and Jeneda Benally — create powerful, rhythmic songs challenging us to open our eyes to the environmental destruction and marginalization of indigenous cultures.

CJ Ramone produced the group's 1994 self-titled debut, while their most recent, *One Nation Under*, was produced by Hole and Sonic Youth knob twiddler Don Fleming. Their father, Jones Benally, a traditional Diné singer, contributes vocal performances along with the late Joey Ramone. Blackfire were honored to have been asked to write music for two previously unreleased lyrics by Woody Guthrie.

The band does wonderful things with "Mean Things A Happenin' In This World," while "Indian Corn Song" has velocity and power far beyond many things on the radio these days. The group promotes an alcohol- and drug-free message through performances and workshops on music, politics, the environment and native issues. They also perform traditional Diné dances with their father as the Jones Benally Family.

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That same night in a nearby neighborhood, Luckey's welcomes Midwesterners **The Slats**. Too interesting to overlook, mastermind Brian Cox propels forth raw, stripped down, thumping rock and roll, with a big pinch of geek rock, a love affair with synth pop and inexplicable lyrics that surfaced from deep within his dark unconscious (sample lyric: "Psychokinesis multiply/ Pulse amplifier ... encode genetic make-up/ Another billion dollar break down break up"). It's as if vocalist/guitarist Cox, drummer Mark Langgin and vocalist/guitarist NS Eliot create an auditory screen-saver for your brain while you're pumped up on steroids listening to Devo. Cox records and produces all of this music. The Slats' latest release is *The Great Plains of San Francisco*, on Tyros Records. I love "The Weapon That I Used," "You Ruined A Good Idea," and "Obliterate These Beats." Way cool!

John Henry's welcomes a blast of a show Tuesday night, with **Joel R. L. Phelps & The Downer Trio**, **Treasure State**, and **Mines**. Also known as Joel Phelps, Phelps co-founded Silkworm and The Downer Trio. A Seattle via Missoula, Mont., band, Phelps debuted with Silkworm's first tape in 1988. Several recordings followed, most recorded by veteran producer and fellow Montanan Steve Albini. Phelps is back after a two-year hiatus, following 2001's *Inland Empires*, a CD of covers with three forceful originals, and The Downer Trio's last, 1999's *Blackbird*. His newest recording, *Customs*, is vaguely promised for a late 2003/early 2004 release. Phelps, along with Bill Herzog (Neko Case) and Robert Mercer, are The Downer Trio. Treasure States is Mercer's band. The name Downer Trio is not entirely indicative of the music; while Phelps can lyrically seem mopey, there's an underlying post-punk intensity and strength in the music, akin to Neil Young's fuzzy guitar wanderings and Mission of Burma's straight ahead gaze. The music comes across with a directness that can't be ignored. It forces you to take it all in before it self-destructs. *The Way The Wind Whips The Water*, the 2002 release by Mines, would not



Blackfire plays at the WOW Hall.

be out of place on the Thrill Jockey roster. The syncopated rhythms and breezy feel instantly reminded me of Tortoise or The Sea and Cake. Yet Mines also masters the wispy guitar landscape those bands wouldn't venture into. Mines also originates in Missoula, and

adopted Seattle as a home base. Chad Hanson and Ron Lewis teamed up with Aaron Bolton and Tim Holland (both formerly with The Dutch Flat) in Missoula in 1994. The group has boiled it down to three, as they are currently without Holland. **EW**

Take the Coconut Milk

A talk with Jack Johnson. By Ben Fogelson.

Jack Johnson, foremost a surfer, next a filmmaker and musician, is touring the Northwest with Ben Harper. Both artists will play full sets Aug. 19 at the Les Schwab Amphitheatre in Bend, and Aug. 20 at Columbia Meadows in St. Helens.

Johnson's first album, *Brushfire Fairytales*, targeted an audience of about 5,000 surfers, but the entire planet grabbed it instead. His new album, *On and On*, is smooth personal rock in the tradition of *Fairytales* and is available now.

Johnson's surf films, *Thicker Than Water* and *September Sessions*, are works of art and surely worthy of an eyeballing, capable of inspiring the most maladroit to give surfing a try.

Johnson talked recently with *EW*.

EW: What do you prefer, surfing a perfect barrel in Indonesia with coconut milk waiting on shore, or hearing 10,000 smiling fans singing the lyrics to your songs?

JJ: Well, personally I like surfing. They're both pretty fun and luckily I get to do both, but if I had to choose, it'd be the barrel in Indo.

EW: You ever get a chance to surf Oregon?

JJ: No. I've surfed Washington. I forget the name of the area, but it was ... uh ... cold.

EW: What's it like to go from creating a work that you don't expect many people to hear, to *On and On*, an album that you knew absolutely millions would hear, enjoy and criticize?

JJ: It's kind of a trip. I just try not to put too much pressure on myself, but it's like you

said. The first one we put out thinking a few surfers were going to buy it and it just kept on going. We knew the second one was going to get reviews and things like that so it was challenging, but we just decided to make it laid back and not think we had to step it up. We got some criticism for making it sound too much like the first one. We also got a lot of praise for not changing. It depends on who you talk to, I guess.

EW: You sing the line, "There were so many fewer questions when stars were still just the holes to heaven." Seems like you're expressing confusion you might feel with newfound stardom?

JJ: No, I was reading this book called *Northern Star to Southern Cross*; it was talking about how back in the day people would look up and think that a big dome came over at night, and there were these holes. The stars were heaven shining through. I was thinking about how as things develop we get further along, figure everything out. Scientists keep making breakthroughs, things become more confusing when it's probably a lot more simple. People believed it was just heaven behind the dome.

EW: So you did the Wild Duck here.

JJ: That was a couple years ago, August 2001.

EW: Any plans to come back through? Is there a chance you might play smaller markets again?

JJ: Yeah, we don't get to hit every town, but right before we went on tour with Ben we did 10 shows across the states. A lot were about 600 capacity, like how the Wild Duck was. It's fun to play an outdoor venue and have that many people, the energy, but at the same time it's fun to play a small room where you can have conversations. It's cool to not forget about the smaller stuff; it's pretty easy to get sucked away.

EW: If you could hang at the beach for the day and surf with anyone from history who would it be?

JJ: Let's see, surfers ... well I've had a funny life where I've got to meet a lot of 'em; my dad kind of knew a lot of those guys that I would think of. I'm trying to think of one I haven't met. The obvious one would be Duke Kahanamoku. He'd be very cool to go for a surf with. He had all these great quotes about how everybody gets all anxious about trying to get their waves, and if you just sit there long enough the waves will come. He's just really patient. Seems like a great guy. One of the first guys to start off the whole thing. **EW**

