

Breaking Down the Walls

Ala Zingara melds gypsy, rock and world.

On average, 20 or so CDs arrive at the EW office each week with an average of 10 songs on each one. 200 songs a week times 50 work weeks means I listen to about 10,000 songs a year. Sometimes only for 10 seconds, but I listen to them all.

Ala Zingara's lead singer, bouzouki player and acoustic guitarist Robert Parks wrote one of the three best songs I heard in all of 2004, "Because the Silence."

But it's live that Ala Zingara truly shines. Their shows are amazing, high-energy celebrations and you won't be able to sit still. On the last release, *Shackled To the Wind*, "Because the Silence" and "Golden Splendor" (another gem) are the closest things to straight rock songs you'll hear. "Because the Silence" builds slowly, the melody picked out on an acoustic guitar with nothing but percussionist Ben Morrow's delicate, subtle rattle of background. Then comes Megan Larson with the very first deep, humming notes on upright bass. The song builds impatiently to the moment where Brennan Dignan plays the first bars of melody on electric guitar, with a microsecond of hesitation, introducing Parks' unique vocals.

Drawing strongly on middle eastern influences, AZ whips along with wild, twangy world music in songs like "Macedonian Dance," which whirls you around and leaves you feeling like you just flung your arms out and spun in a circle until you fell down, too dizzy to stand. Others, such as "D Minor" and "Invoking Tara," have moments reminiscent of Rusted Root with a little reggae and Latin flair thrown in. "I suppose I've always been attracted to the unpretentiousness of world music," Parks said. "Music that has that community vibe to it. I buy records of music all over the world."

And those international influences make it into AZ's music even though each song stands alone, a complete work unto itself. Within the songs, all four musicians balance their parts perfectly so that the end product is something that sounds finished and whole.

On bouzouki Parks is exceptional, and with a Neil Young-ish voice, he would define AZ if all the other players weren't equally strong. Larson and Morrow are masters of musical white space. Tempo changes and complex rhythms with slight pauses and hesitations build and resolve tension within the songs. On backup, Larson's harmonies weave light, bright threads through a tapestry dominated by heavy, primary colors. Guitarist Brennan Dignan falls in step with lilting beats, strums and sparsely placed notes that rely as heavily on the silence between the notes as the notes themselves.

Don't miss this one.

EW

Ala Zingara
9 pm, Saturday,
July 22
Cozmic Pizza, \$4
www.alazingara.com



From Eugene with Love

Local musicians invited to honor Chet Atkins at festival.

Back in March I told you that Eugene teenager **Brooks Robertson** was wowing the world with his Chet Atkins-style fingerpicked guitar wizardry. Robertson, along with four other local musicians, was invited to attend the 21st annual **Chet Atkins Festival**, held recently in Nashville by the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society.

From July 12 through July 17 musicians from all over congregated in Nashville to pay respects to guitar great Atkins, mingle with instrument manufacturers and hobnob with industry bigwigs. Robertson joined up with his mentor **Buster B. Jones**, guitarist **Bobby Gibson**, whose first Portland-based band included Willy Nelson, **Nokie Edwards**, who rose to fame as lead guitarist for The Ventures, and saxophone player **Paul Biondi**. What, a saxophone player at a guitar convention?

Biondi has accompanied many famous musicians on the horn over his illustrious career, including Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Mel Torme, Ella Fitzgerald, Barbara Streisand, Ray Charles and Lena Horne. A career musician since high school, Biondi toured for several years with Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin, Ike and Tina Turner, and later Smokey Robinson. You're thinking, what is this guy doing here in lil' ol' Eugene? Blame it on the magic of Oregon's natural beauty, because a 1992 visit to Florence drew Biondi away from Los Angeles and into our convivial arms.

Biondi is thrilled to be welcomed into the Chet Atkins Festival, thanks to his working friendships with Edwards and Jones and other Nashville-based musicians he's been introduced to. "It's fantastic," said Biondi by phone from the Nashville Sheridan Hotel, where the convention was held. "They pretty much are really celebrating Chet Atkins, his life and what he brought into the industry and also his style of fingerpicking. If you're a guitar player this is pretty much what you try to learn and do."

The Ventures' first hit song was "Walk, Don't Run," a song Atkins made famous, originally written by Johnny Smith. "He recorded it, then Chet recorded it a second time, then we [The Ventures] got it off of Chet's album," said Edwards, by phone from Nashville. Edwards and Atkins became personal friends, and Edwards said it's great seeing all the recognition and respect paid to Atkins year after year. "There's so many world class players that come here, it's unbelievable," he said.

Edwards and his wife Judy are in the process of selling their Veneta home and have downsized to a large motorcoach. They will return to Eugene after the festival to participate in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life in Eugene on July 29th at Lane Community College. Edwards will open the event with "Walk, Don't Run." Judy Edwards said, "It's for a good cause and there's nothing more touching than seeing all those candles lit" for survivors of cancer and those lost to the disease. —Vanessa Salvia

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