

Grain & Demise
10 pm, Friday, Jan. 13
John Henry's. \$4.



A Grain of Rock

Split Lip Rayfield's Kirk Rundstrom doing his own thing.

"I'm busy. I pretty much play live every night of the month," says Kirk Rundstrom, guitarist and vocalist for rock 'n' roll band Grain & Demise, as he prepares for a sound check in Boulder, Colo., the night before two shows in Denver.

Busy may be an understatement. Besides leading Grain & Demise, Rundstrom is also a guitarist and vocalist for Split Lip Rayfield and the Kirk Rundstrom Band. "In the next three months Grain & Demise does 18 shows a month and Split Lip does seven shows a month," Rundstrom says. "But I love my job. I love touring. I'm very fortunate for sure." His life is all about touring and playing music. When asked what he does in his spare time he took a moment, kind of laughed, then said, "Um ... play music."

Rundstrom and his Grain & Demise band-mates Ryan Johnson, Calvin Bennett and Bridget Law found time in their hectic touring schedule to put out a new album, *To the Heavens*. While their debut release was more country rock, this album has a few tracks reminiscent of The Mars Volta.

"We're full-blown electric freak-out," says Rundstrom. "If you're into Hootie & the Blowfish, you probably won't like us. Nothing against [Hootie]."

Grain & Demise's sound is nothing like the punk bluegrass Rundstrom plays in Split Lip Rayfield, which one online reviewer described as "bluegrass worthy of being blasted out of the windows of a Plymouth Barracuda with a 451 Hemi engine."

But Law is a fiddler and she gives the band a unique quality. The 22-year-old didn't learn her instrument in an orchestra setting; as a youth she toured the country competing in fiddling competitions. "She shreds," Rundstrom says. **EW**

Power Plays

Eugene's J.C. Rico sings his own blues.

"If you ask me a question you got to be prepared for whatever answer I give you." Thus began my conversation with Jessie Cassious Rico, or J.C., as he's known. Rico's larger than life, a big guy who laughs at everything, or maybe because of everything. "You got to find the humor in life or you won't survive," he says.

Born in the Mississippi Delta, this 58-year-old paid his way through college after his Navy stint by working as a ranch hand. He rides horses, lives in the country and adores Patsy Cline. He thinks it's only a little unusual for a black man to be fronting a blues band at a country-western bar. "I'm more country than most folk in here," he said with a giant-sized laugh.

He's been playing music and singing in church with his family since he was 4, and now his well-trained pipes can belt out anything, absolutely any type of song. Every emotion comes from deep down in his toes, welling up, filling the whole room. Rico sees connections between blues and country music pointing out that "They come from the same place, church." He may never be rich, but the only thing that has real value to Rico is the love of music and the fans. "You see someone being sad, and you can make them smile, that's worth a million bucks," he says.

Before his family moved from Mississippi to Chicago, he remembers being surrounded by famous bluesmen like B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Z.Z. Hill and T-Bone Walker. But they were just the folks "who lived next door." Actually, he calls B.B. King "Uncle B.B." and says "B.B. told me, 'You can play my



blues if you want to, but it'd be better if you played your own blues for your time.' There are blues snobs who think blues should be all like 'My dog done died.'" Then he sings out, "Yeah, the dog died, in 1932! You got to sing about what's happening today! Blues is the pain you feel today."

It's difficult for Rico to align himself with today's blues scene, however, because as he sees it, it's full of fakers who "just want to get their picture in the paper" and don't care that they can't really play. Rico lays down the truth: "You can have the best write-up from a critic, but if the audience don't like you, you ain't going nowhere!"

It's been hard to find and keep good musicians over the years, but the crew he has now is top-notch and features some of the best players in town, if not the state. Peter Giri and Steve Ibach play guitar, along with Paul Biondi's incredibly hot saxophone (sometimes playing two horns at once), soulful bassist Russ Whitlach, Sean Jackson putting all his heart into the keyboards, and K.C. Case holding it all together on drums.

During a recent set at their regular Thursday night gig at The Country Side, Rico's Alliance Blues band tore through two smoking blues rock tunes then sweetened things up with an unexpected doo-wop number that brought out the lover in everybody. Though Rico's blood runs blue, he plays many different styles of music, and the fans love it. Throw in some Doors, Temptations and Eagles and you've got one incredibly versatile band that plays "a little somethin' for everybody" and has a lot of fun doing it. — *Vanessa Salvia*

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