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Can't Put Your Finger On It

Squirrel NutZippers mine mysteries – and their back catalog

The Squirrel Nut Zippers aren't a swing band. Despite a breakout hit single, "Hot," that conveniently fit into the swing revival of the early '90s (much like the Cherry Poppin' Daddies' "Zoot Suit Riot"), the Zippers' sound always veered towards the unclassifiable. "I think a lot of swing music fans come out expecting a swing concert," drummer Chris Phillips told me recently over the phone. "And I think they are disappointed sometimes because we're not that, really."

What the Zippers are, really, is a band that manages to capture their influences (Delta blues, jug band, gypsy jazz, klezmer and swing as well as Southern Gothic literature and personas) and fuse them together, often in a single song. Their masterpiece of 1998, *Perennial Favorites* (which Phillips rightfully dubs a "crowning achievement"), captured that mashup potential with revivalist gusto that made albums by the Daddies or Brian Setzer sound trivial in comparison — at least looking back on that time 10 years later. With the 2000s a musical era of melting genres and music history mining, *Perennial Favorites* seems groundbreaking.

Take, for example, "The Ghost of Stephen Foster," one of the Zippers' finest songs. After a long, building intro with violin and percussion, the song launches into a mariachi interlude before settling on a vaudeville jug band-cum-klezmer sound with chorus, wicked laughter and lyrics that question the happy-go-lucky aura over American music pioneer Stephen Foster's songs, especially "Camptown Races." James "Jimbo" Mathus (vocals/guitar) was reading a book on Foster at the time of the song's birth, Phillips says, and he elaborated on the idea that Foster might be darker (and drunker) than history has shown. "You take Jimbo's Southern

Gothic storywriting and you mix it with this klezmer music and it kind of just came to fruition in that way."

In Phillips' words, they've been influenced by "everything that was dark and mysterious and you couldn't put your finger on." And that suits the Zippers just fine. "We never thought to be a perfect band," says Phillips. "We tried to hit on that mystery that makes all of us kind of laugh ... you cry a lot and you laugh a lot. Then you get drunk."

Squirrel Nut Zippers
7 pm, Wednesday, Aug. 13
WOW Hall, \$18 adv., \$20 door

But by 2000, the band was feeling burned out on the old material and an endless tour circuit. Band members went their separate ways for a while. In 2007 the Zippers "snuck out" on tour to see how it felt. And it felt great. "It's nice to be in a spot where everybody wants to be there," Phillips says. Playing their back catalog, the Zippers "subtly reinvented all the material." Phillips claims "you won't get the same concert in 2008 that you would've back in 1999."

"I'm not interested in being a heritage act," says Phillips, who will enter the studios with the Zippers this fall to work on a new album. "The idea of doing new recordings so many years later is exciting to us. Let it grow and be different, but still sound like us."

But will the die-hard swing fans go easy on them this time around? Well, they should, given that the ELLA Swing Dance Club will conduct a free swing dance lesson before the Zippers' show, starting at 6 pm. Just don't expect all swing, all the time.