

Jammin' Theory

Jam band **Strum Theory** (pictured) has been performing around Eugene in various incarnations for many years, but has only played a few gigs with their current lineup. Vocalist and primary songwriter Michael Domagala felt it would be best if I met him at south Eugene's post office and followed him to Strum Theory's practice space.

"The place is hard to find," he emailed. He's right. On the first truly summer-like day of the spring, we drive beyond Eugene's south hills, through a secured gate and past a dilapidated red barn, arriving at bassist Paul Shroder's home. I'm about to experience one of Strum Theory's biweekly rehearsals – what they call their "Sunday church."

Sitting in Shroder's yard we talk about the influences and inspirations that got the Eugene four-piece playing music in the first place. Domagala grew up on the Beatles, and is influenced by jam bands like the Dave Matthews Band. Guitarist/trumpet player Jeff Hurt and drummer Tyler Tjernland come from jazz and blues backgrounds, and Shroder, who only started playing music in his 30s, has been heavily influenced by the hybrid funk-rock of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

We move inside the practice space. The band members kick off their shoes and begin their set with "Get Out Back," a festival-ready tune that shows the musicians' influences immediately. Domagala's spidery guitar lines recall Dave Matthews as he sings lyrics about getting outside and experiencing the beauty of the world in a tenor that is too light to be called Eddie Vedder-esque but definitely shares the Pearl Jam singer's guttural growl. Hurt adds to the jazz flavor with hooky trumpet-lines, and Tjernland's percussion is solid, laying down the bouncy groove and stopping on a dime as "Get Out Back" swells to its climax. Hurt switches to guitar, and the band continues through their tight practice set.

The addition of Hurt as a multi-faceted instrumentalist has given the band a new wave of vigor. Talent-wise they are ready to tour and could rock any festival stage they want, and hard. But they know that music, now more than ever, is a tough business to survive in – even for a band like Strum Theory,



which places more emphasis on live performance than recording. "It's about bringing your music to the people," Shroder says, and they will continue doing just that.

Strum Theory plays with Sol Riot and Ambush Party 9 pm Friday, June 17, at Luckey's; \$5. – *William Kennedy*

Deliver Us from Banjo

"Dueling Banjos" has become synonymous with the image of terrifyingly inbred yokels with phenomenal banjo skills. OK, and probably the most chilling scene in cinematic history comes to mind as well. The first few twangy notes of that song will forever be associated with men forced to squeal like pigs in *Deliverance*. **The Banjo Killers** are here to combat that image. The only terrifying thing about this duo is the almost inhuman speed at which their fingers fly across fretboards and strings.

Award-winning banjo player Tony Furtado mans the banjo half of the Banjo Killers, while Scott Law tackles the guitar. The majority of their sound centers around the twangy banjo, naturally, and Furtado's skillful mastery of the instrument deserves every showcase it gets. But the sound would be incomplete without Law's guitar to fill out the inescapable tin of the banjo.

Both men have been playing their respective instruments practically since infancy, and it shows. Furtado and Law complement each other wonderfully. They blend when they need to blend and take turns stepping out of the spotlight for each other. The guitar and banjo *pas de deux* is perfectly in step, at times sounding like one instrument. It's the kind of music that should accompany an indie Manic Pixie Dream Girl as she frolics through a sunny wheat field.

Most of their songs focus strongly on instrumentals, but when the Banjo Killers introduce singing they go Southern with it, as demonstrated by their cover of Muddy Waters' "Trouble No More." The otherwise smooth vocals are punctuated with upswings and breaks that add depth rather than the impression of a sticky, affected Southern accent.

The Banjo Killers marry guitar and banjo seamlessly, and manage to sidestep cliché country crooning. Their live shows are sprinkled with anecdotes and generate plenty of down-home charm. So if it's a laid-back, bluegrass kind of night and you're looking for something upbeat to while away the hours, check out the Banjo Killers.

The Banjo Killers play 8:30 pm Saturday, June 25, at the Axe & Fiddle in Cottage Grove; \$10. – *Natalie Horner*

REVIEW

Pharoahe Monch

Wednesday, June 8
WOW Hall
Photo by Todd Cooper
More photos at
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REIGN OF THE PHAROAEH CONTINUES

Hip hop was honored Wednesday, June 8, at the WOW Hall when **Pharoahe Monch** stepped to the stage. Smash-mouthed unabashed microphone-murdering lyrics had the crowd jumping (literally, the WOW Hall floor felt like a trampoline) to songs that Monch wrote ten years ago – he is that type of legend in the hip hop world, creating music that has what industry booking agents call "replay value." The songs off his new album, *W.A.R.*, though not as iconic as his previous work, offer the same reality check that hip hop heads need – and that they were given when Monch first hit the scene. Back then the declaration was one of defiance in the face of mainstream bullshit ghetto-fabulous rap made by studio (wannabe) gangstas giving suburban white boys who play too much *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas* wet dreams. Now that same declaration sparked and owned by Monch and his (few) peers is one of pure existence. "Is hip hop in the building?" Monch asked. It was. He was answered by a screaming horde of true underground heads who knew his lyrics and shouted them back to him.

Monch is a throwback, a hip hop dinosaur from a time not long past that seems to be lost and forgotten by everyone who stopped coming out to "conscious" hip hop shows – which is exactly the reason such shows ceased coming around. We were fortunate to have an MC of Monch's talent come to town, and it was a testament to his stature how off-the-hook his show was.

The self-proclaimed "most obligated" MC sat in the green room after his killer performance, looking like a man who'd just walked away from an explosion. I told him I got his first album when I was 17 years old, and he told me he'd just spoken to a man who said the same thing, but the age was 14. Monch smiles. "That's some amazing shit," he says, then tells me he always wanted to make something people would remember, like the music he grew up on: Coltrane, Zeppelin, Sabbath, Hendrix. His genre is not as all-penetrating, but his influence in that genre is.

Though visibly haggard from a hard tour, the Queens-raised Monch continued to give an enthusiastic interview. He sounds a little like Mike Tyson in cadence and pitch – a far cry from his commanding stage-voice on the mic, which sounds like some big spooky fool that would stomp you out in the parking lot of a Dodger game. Monch's intellect is sharp, he breaks down the underground hip hop scene (or what is left of it) in succinct language: "The failure to sell records has caused people to revert back to the basics," those basics being a sick beat and an ill verse. It was Monch's showmanship that won the crowd; it is this same energy that will continue to carry him into the minds and boomboxes of those who know, remember or just found out.

– *Dante Zuñiga-West*

