

There is a high, lonesome, gravelly sound in the air. The sound is simple but by no means easy to play — and even harder to categorize. Traditional and alternative genres are merging, multiplying and mating. The acoustic strumming and picking of hybrid Americana roots music sloughs the edges of other genres adopting bits of punk, blues and country as the music flows from the instruments of younger musicians willing to experiment with it. The resurgence is national, and we have a Eugenean abundance.

Nationally touring groups such as Yonder Mountain String Band, Head for the Hills and The Avett Brothers have helped trend-set this renewal, blending bluegrass, rock, country and other traditional styles into an excitedly unrecognizable form. Scour the calendars of local entertainment rags like this one and you will find an overwhelming number of bands that fall into this moving target of a genre — some venues, such as Sam Bond's, and Axe & Fiddle, devote entire nights to open-ended jams, at which hungry and bearded boot-wearing musicians show up to showcase their own slice of what isn't necessarily traditional bluegrass, country, blues or folk, but rather something that is evolving into its own genre — alterna-grass.

"The outdoorsy woodsy crowd that has settled in the Northwest has created this new younger appreciation of bluegrass-ish music," says local promoter and musician Cindy Ingram of The Whiskey Chasers. "There is a fast, hard bluegrass style with an old country vibe to it that is bubbling up."

Though the initial foundation of traditional bluegrass

and folk — moving from French-inflected Cajun music up through the Carter Family — is a strong contributor to the wave of younger musicians, it is an amalgamation of unplugged, speedy acoustic music now permeating the stages of Oregon and Washington.

"I didn't play acoustic stuff until I came to the Pacific Northwest," says Aaron Nelson of the Alder Street Allstars, a five-piece acoustic group that thrives on the type of bluegrass-influenced music prevalent in this area. "It's what's around."

Similar to jazz, and not unlike hip hop, the alterna-grass phenomenon is a free-form mixed-bag aesthetic. The music incorporates everything from foot stomping to washboards as instruments, and consists primarily of acoustic string instruments. The vocals tend toward high and harmonized, with simple rhythms offset by complicated melodies.

But dissimilar to newer forms of conglomerate music such as hip hop, glitch hop or American dubstep, the alterna-grass explosion is not bolstered by a newly acquired abundance of technology. Quite the contrary. Musicians say that it is the lack of technical sophistication that brings this influx of telltale acoustic music to the foreground here.

"The Pacific Northwest is full of travelers," Nelson says. "People who travel tend to carry their instruments on their backs — which means the instruments will be acoustic by default."

"It's not like rock music where you need an electric guitar, or anything to plug in. This is outdoor party music, which is why people here are into it," Ingram says.

Left Coast Country, a Portland-based alterna-grass band that often finds itself gigging up and down the I-5

corridor of Oregon and Washington, takes its inspiration from bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe, creating a sound that piggybacks on traditional bluegrass and folk. The band's music is testament to the versatility of an aesthetic as it morphs via the experimentalism of younger musicians.

"Our sound is very bluegrass influenced, but we've covered songs from Danzig, to Pharcyde, to Steve Earle," says guitarist Shaun Kalis.

"The music is relatively simple to start playing but hard to get good at," he continues, "which makes it easy to translate and allows people with different musical backgrounds to jump in on it."

"Bluegrass is, at its roots, a hybrid music," says Yoko Silk, cellist of the Eugene-born, Portland-based Bad Mitten Orchestre. "So I think it is only natural that it is again inspiring hybridization. The music invites participation."

Drummer Ian Haight of Bad Mitten has a different theory as to why this music is so abundant and popular in the Northwest: "There are a lot of beard-clad, axe-wielding, whiskey-drinking people who seem to be plucked out of an earlier time living in the Northwest. Because of that I think it is easier for them to identify with the sentiments in this music."

Be it the simplicity and camaraderie of acoustic jamming or the cultural entrapments of outdoorsy low-tech mountain folk who populate Cascadia, the alterna-grass phenomena has found itself a home in Eugene and beyond. Like grunge in the early '90s, this crossbreed of music will take time to establish itself as more than simply a subgenre, but the foundation has been laid, and the table seems set for more and more to come.

EW

BLUEGRASS

Considered by some to be a subgenre of country, traditional bluegrass music incorporates guitar, stand-up bass, five-string banjo, fiddle and mandolin. The banjo is often played with a three-finger picking technique; the bass is played slap-style and pizzicato; the guitar is usually played in a fashion known as flat-picking, and the fiddler tends to play in thirds and fifths (scale degrees).

Among other non-traditional forms of bluegrass is a sub-genre known as newgrass, in which musicians use electric instruments.

Most bluegrass musicians attribute traditional instrumentation and style to Bill Monroe and his band the Blue Grass Boys. Documentary filmmaker John Cohen first described bluegrass as having a "high and lonesome sound."

JUG BAND MUSIC

This style of American music is characterized by musicians who play homemade or adapted instruments. Instruments can include, but are not limited to washboards, kazoos made from stovepipes, combs and tissue paper, jaw harps, and glass or stone jugs.

Typical jug bands also include banjos, sometimes constructed from surplus guitar necks and metal pie plates.

Jug band music has its origins in the urban portions of the South, where it is rooted in African-American culture and thought to be a key contributor to ragtime, jazz and what would eventually be called Memphis blues.

Jug band music was brought more into the popular culture by bands such as The Orange Blossom Jug Five and the Even Dozen Jug Band. The music is currently enjoying its own hybridization and revival on the West Coast in the anarcho-acoustic punk scene. Bands like Blackbird Raum are a good example of this.

ALTERNATIVE COUNTRY

Putting a different spin on the music of artists such as Hank Williams or Steve Earle, alt-country is country music's younger, more cynical and very socially conscious cousin. Bands like the no-longer-together Uncle Tupelo, Drive-By Truckers and musicians like Hayes Carll have mixed a punk rock aesthetic into music that is less polished and manages to avoid classic or contemporary country themes.

Folk-rock and country-rock are also strong contributors to the alternative country genre, which continues to grow popular in both rural and urban markets. Regional subgenres of alt-country exist as well, as is the case with Red Dirt music, an alt-country relative named after the soil in Oklahoma where it was born.



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