

**Stayin' Classy**

You don't think of Canada and immediately envision hip-hop artists. But any tour-savvy border-breaching American hip-hop group, or any modern hip-hop archivist, will tell you that the Canucks have had it going on up there for quite a while now. Since roughly 1999, emcees from the Great White North have been permeating international airwaves with styles and content rivaling their American counterparts. The first group to achieve breakthrough was Swollen Members, whose debut album *Balance*, an incredibly well produced, darkly medieval collection of songs, redefined what conscious hip hop could be – think *Dungeons & Dragons* meets *Souls of Mischief*. Swollen Members continues to drop albums, and the group's success in the U.S. opened the door for other artists such as Josh Martinez, Iraqi-Canadian standout The Narcycyst and, of course, **Classified**.

Classified is an emcee's emcee. His American equivalent is something like Chicago's Qwel (of Typical Cats), or a young Planet Asia. Classified isn't afraid to tell you what it's like to be a touring musician in the modern world of carnivorous promoters and shady door deals, and he refuses to be one of those cats that forgets where he came from. His music lets you know how he grew up, who he looks up to, what matters in his life and how it relates to the world around him. Some of Classified's best punch lines involve him musing on what it's like to be broke and married while on the road, or how people in the U.S. judge his success as an artist by the type of cell phone he carries.

Despite being well-seasoned, Classified is humble, an award-winning emcee who's been in the game since '95 and is now in the midst of his golden years. This ambassador from the North is a hard-working rhyme-spitter with a lifelong dedication to his craft – about as real as real can get, and then some.

Classified opens for Slaughterhouse at 9 pm Saturday, April 14, at WOW Hall; \$18 adv., \$20 door. – *Dante Zuñiga-West*



**Two Hits and the Joint Turned Brown**

Part of the contract people enter into when they decide to live in Oregon dictates that they will see mountains regularly – whether that be off in the distance or from the summit of the one they've just climbed. While this pastoral outlook on mountains is fine and dandy, it's often easy to forget that the mountains over yonder have an explicit feeling to them – one that can be summed up with scathing, scratchy vocal prowess, feet stomping against porchboards and the hefty plunk of a pick hitting strings – and it's this same romanticized view of musical mountain life that shines through the smooth-hitting jamgrass music of **Yonder Mountain String Band**.

Defying the rather rustic archetype of jam-band culture perpetuated by groups like the Grateful Dead and Phish, Yonder Mountain have more to offer than just stoned psychedelia. Of course, this is not to say that fans aren't fiending for a chance to sing along to tunes about marijuana, hangovers and buzz-kills, though it does provide an incredibly fun source of mature provisions alongside the childish, high-school pipedream-fulfilling hippie-burnout material offered by bands from days past.

One thing people tend to forget about improvisation is that it takes talent. Whether improvisation takes a front seat in Yonder Mountains' live tunes is irrelevant. The fact remains: These dudes know how to play their instruments, and their show this week is guaranteed to be a riotous display of musical expertise.

Yonder Mountain String Band and Brown Bird play at 8:30 pm Thursday, April 19, at McDonald Theatre; \$20 adv., \$25 door. – *Andy Valentine*

**Diamond in the Rough**

So you get one more dude in flash sneakers and a sideways ball cap waving his arms around a switchboard and swerving with the lights and the beats. He wants you to dance, wants your motion to syncopate the rhythms that his gesticulations beckon, to sweat, crystallize and break within four bars. And he wants you to do it again, and again and again. You may ask yourself why get caught up in these Rorschach ripples of synth-twitch revelry and bass under pressure, waiting to be carved away, pared down to that metamorphic ego? Simple: **Paper Diamond** is the jeweler.

Colorado-based Paper Diamond welds festive touring tools from his time as bassist for Pnuma Trio's organic electronica, to playing and producing under his new moniker with Derek Vincent Smith's Pretty Lights label. *Levitate*, Paper Diamond's debut album, showcases that mountain sound with rumbling bass and slip-slide dramatization that feels like origami skis escaping an avalanche. But precise production seeps through tracks like "Snowfall," a soft come-upper with an ambient tow-lift. At other end of the spectrum, "From Now Till..." features tendered samples of expensive taste over whistle-pulsing pressure.

Paper Diamond is another talented switchboard artist trying to help you dance – cut it out, fold it up, get down.

Paper Diamond plays with Minnesota at 8 pm Thursday, April 12, at McDonald Theatre; \$15 adv; \$18 door. – *Patrick Newson*

