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The Bluegrass Sessions:

MERLE HAGGARD

GETS HIGH AND LONESOME

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■ BY DAVE HIGGS

"Sinner, you better get ready..."

THE PACKWAY HANDLE BAND of Athens, GA



Photo by Jessica Horwitz

"Sinner, you better get ready. Oh, you better get ready... hallelujah!"

The tune is from the 1937 Monroe Brothers' songbag, but the delivery is all 21st century. The Packway Handle Band sings it with fire and brimstone, bringing the audience to the veritable brink of the pit of hell. "SINNER, you better get REH-ah-dee. 'Time's a comin' when the sinner must die."

The Athens, Georgia quintet has already ink-stamped some audience members' foreheads: "(Sinner)" reads the stamp, after the tune's official name, "(Sinner) You Better Get Ready." The crowd is feeling it now, from the top

of their faithless heads to the soles of their command-breaking feet. The abyss begins to open before their eyes as fiddler Andrew "The Heatwave" Heaton steps up to the group's trademark two-condenser-mic setup. "Here's the sound of sin," he rasps with sternness that could provoke an atheist into speaking in tongues, launching into a screeching, otherworldly, dunk-me-in-the-river-right-now solo.

"Sinner, you better get ready." For almost five minutes the band warns, chides and pleads, with Michael Paynter's bluesy mandolin accentuating the melody, Tom Baker's banjo driving a stake through the heart of disbelief; Josh "Caesar Frankenstein" Erwin's guitar adding a righteous rhythmic bounce; and Zach McCoy's bass pushing the song to its inevitable conclusion. "Fire and ash will soon descend... Watch out, sinner, 'cause you're facing your end." The Heatwave's lead vocals crackle with compassion for the lost. The crowd is spellbound. A night of frivolity and revelry has morphed into an old-time East Texas brush arbor meeting. One thing is obvious to all: The Packway Handle Band is not your father's bluegrass band.

Fortunately, Packway Handle is a merciful group, not about to leave its audience in gut-wrenching despair after the dire sermon. "There once was a duck and I named him Earl," The Heatwave croons to a dirge-like melody, "but then I found out that Earl was a girl." The mood instantly lightens with "Earl the Duck," a clever tune about a duck's unusual predicament. The plot thickens when Earl the girl falls for a drake named Lady Luck. Both are uncomfortable with the whole thing, but instead of just reversing their names, they each decide to have a sex change operation! The audience hangs on every word as the song builds to a thunderous climax, with gorgeous four-part harmonies and a chorus that sounds vaguely reminiscent of a minor version of "Arkansas Traveler."

In a high lonesome world rife with bands that sound frighteningly alike, the Packway Handle Band stands alone. After toying with names like "Ioby McGillicuty & the Radius of Destruction," the band settled on its current moniker when a friend, in a burst of alcohol-induced inspiration, blurted out "PACKWAY HANDLE!" during a show, apropos of nothing at all. The year was



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2001 and the newly-christened band, built around four buddies who'd played rock 'n roll in high school, was on its way. (Andrew, the lone "outsider," came on board in 2004).

Band members' unconventional backgrounds, love for a shocking variety of musical genres, and overall unmitigated zaniness all make for a potent, trend-bucking combination. "I don't think I had any real concept of what bluegrass was at all until I was in college," Tom says. "We were into Nirvana and the Violent Femmes."

"My dad was a classical violinist and although he loved bluegrass, he thought it was a kind of comedy music," says Andrew. "He'd turn it on after having listened to Brahms or Haydn, and laugh for a half hour straight. That was my introduction to bluegrass."

The Packway Handle Band entered the national spotlight with its second-place finish in the 2004 Telluride band competition. Although the quintet's sound is deeply rooted in the bluegrass tradition, its repertoire is peppered with unlikely covers such as Madonna's "Like a Prayer," jokingly included on the group's 2005 otherwise all-gospel outing, *(Sinner) You Better Get Ready*. "You've got to find a way to have fun when you play or you're going to be lost," Andrew says. "On top of that, everyone has an unusual and extreme sense of humor. We've done some really crazy things."

They sure have. Entertainment for the *(Sinner) You Better Get Ready* CD release party included fire twirlers, belly dancers, a burlesque troupe and no less than five costume changes, including women's clothes and three-piece suits, for the band. Another of Packway Handle's finest moments was its Cinco de Mayo show. "We spent a whole week making




piñatas, filling them with oatmeal crème pies and other disgusting things," Tom says.

"I remember that show," Andrew recalls gleefully. "We did a Spanish version of the Gypsy Kings' rendition of 'Hotel California.' We never did that again."

The band constantly dares to venture outside the proverbial Bill Monroe-created box. Another of the Packway Handle Band's trademarks is its tight, soaring, inspired four-part harmonies, which particularly shine on its gospel material, always in demand. "It's good to make a living playing music, but it's fantastic to make a living singing it every night," Andrew states enthusiastically.

Packway Handle's latest, self-titled CD highlights the band's instrumental prowess (Josh's sizzling "Tossin' the Beefcake"), brilliantly crafted originals (such as chief songwriter Michael's "The Story" and "River Delta"); the aforementioned "Earl the Duck" and Andrew's devastatingly quirky "Satan's in Space"). "We wanted to do everything ourselves, because we care about the quality of our music so much," Andrew laughs. "Not simply because we're cheap—as we definitely are. You should see the kind of food we eat on the road!"

"One of the things I'm proudest of about this band," Tom adds, "is that when we're staying in hotel rooms, we set alarms to wake up and eat the continental breakfast right before it ends... and then go back to sleep until check-out time."

More information on *The Packway Handle Band* can be found at packway-handle.com. Bands wishing to appear in "Band to Watch" should send their most recent CD, band photo and promo materials to Dave Higgs, PO Box 4369, Clarksburg, WV 26302-4369. 

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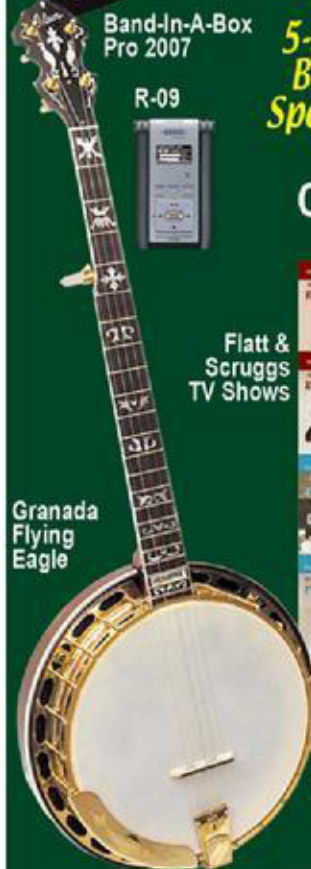
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