

**Packway Handle Band:****“Chaff Harvest”**

(Self released CD)

The Athens, Georgia-based Packway Handle Band comes highly recommended. Together only since 2001, they have certainly been attracting a lot of attention; in 2002 they placed second in the Athens Music Factory's Battle of the Bands—no small feat considering that they performed acoustically, through a single microphone, against a field consisting mostly of highly electrified rock bands. The summers of 2002 and 2003 found them traveling to Colorado where they were finalists in the venerable Telluride Bluegrass Festival's band competition, and last year they were the southeastern winners of the Miller Lite Locals Only band competition and were also named Athens' best bluegrass band by Fluggole magazine.

Obviously, something is going on here. That “something” is a convergence of five young musicians who, after spending their teen and college years exploring other styles of music including rock and jazz, have recently fallen in love with bluegrass and acoustic music and have begun making it with a vengeance. Their debut recording, “Chaff Harvest,” showcases their engaging, creative—some may even say quirky—approach to the music.

“They are not a traditional bluegrass band,” Mike Warga told me in his e-mail asking me to review this recording, and he was right. This is not a recording for those who would like bluegrass to remain frozen in 1953 with the music of the great first-generation performers. Their original material is nontraditional in its lyrics and its chord structures, the instrumental performances sometimes push the boundaries of the genre, and the band's vocal sound is not high and lonesome, but contemporary and folk-flavored. From my first time through the disc it was apparent that this was a band with its own identity, and I have found that identity more engaging and appealing with each listening.

The set kicks off with “All the Time in the World,” an original song by mandolinist Michael Paynter, who contributed five of the album's eleven tracks. The medium-tempo song takes the listener by surprise when the band seamlessly speeds up into a breakdown-speed extended jam section, then drops the tempo once again for a couple more breaks before a final vocal verse. Paynter's lead singing is smooth and easy, and the band's harmony blend is a satisfying one, sometimes reminiscent of the doubled-tracked sound employed by west-coast bands of the country-rock movement such as the Byrds and the Dillards.

“Shelva Ann” is one of two songs on the disc penned by guitarist Josh Erwin. This minor-key composition is ably delivered by Erwin's smooth baritone vocal with strong high harmony on the choruses.

The third track is an instrumental rendition of the pop standard “The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise,” the Packway Handle Band's version of the tune embodies the adventurous spirit of the Country Gentlemen's seminal recording from the 1950s. Of that track which heralded the arrival of jazzy improvisation within the bluegrass idiom, John Duffey said “it came from the realization that you cannot play like somebody else and expect

to create anything that's your own.” One suspects that Duffey would approve of the Packway Handle Band's interpretation, which highlights the inventive instrumental work of Paynter's mandolin, Erwin's flatpicked guitar, and Tom Baker's banjo. Paynter and Erwin both elicit beautiful tone from their instruments and their aggressive improvisations sometimes contain startlingly dissonant passages. Baker's banjo work is one of the more traditional elements in the band's mix, but his solid Scruggs style interspersed with tasteful melodic and chromatic licks serves the band's sound well and provides an earthier counterpoint to some of the other instrumentalists' more exotic flights of fancy.

“Totz, Kentucky” is another Paynter original, a fond recollection of an idyllic Appalachian hometown featuring extended instrumental breaks. Chris Holliday, who provides rock-steady upright bass work throughout the recording, uses a bow to excellent advantage here.

“Mac the Weatherman” and “Inverted Umbrella Parachute” show off Paynter's considerable knack for writing catchy, memorable choruses, as well as the group's smooth vocal harmonies. The band has a reputation for great live shows, and it's easy to see why with such energetic material.

“Cryin' Sorrows” is Josh Erwin's second contribution to the disc, a gentle waltz dealing with the time-honored bluegrass theme of lovers separated by death.

It's great to have such a wealth of original material, but we also get to hear what the band does with the traditional fiddle tune “Red Haired Boy.” Fiddler Andrew Heaton is turned loose here, and his fluid playing is helped along ably by a tight rhythm section accented by Erwin's driving guitar bass runs. Breaks get traded all around and the tune ends up with a nice solo twinned by the fiddle and mandolin.

“Throw Away the Key” is the album's last original by Michael Paynter, and again we're treated to an infectious, “hooky” chorus, staggered harmonies, and virtuosic picking.

Two traditional songs round out the collection: “Tell It to Me” is one of those old-time songs populated by characters like Cocaine Bill and Morphine Sue, and for some reason it sounds to me like it could have been a lost track from the New Grass Revival's 1973 debut “green” album. The old chestnut “In the Pines” gives all the instrumentalists, including guest dobroist Matt Stoessel, a chance to stretch their blues chops, and ends with a nifty modification of the vocal harmony.

“Chaff Harvest” is a welcome breath of fresh air from an innovative band that shows even more promise for the future. You can keep up with the band and its active tour schedule at <http://www.packwayhandle.com>.