

And the Bluegrass Grows All Around

By Adam Preskill

Aspen Daily News Music Critic

There seems to be a bluegrass movement afoot in town. Maybe it's the venues that have popped up in the wake of the Double Diamond's closure — spots like Main Street Bakery and Zélé Music Café that are more suitable for acoustic music — but whatever the reason, local bluegrass upstarts and touring acts have both popped up on music schedules more frequently of late.

The five-day Beyond Bluegrass Festival at the Wheeler Opera House will be the culmination of Aspen bluegrass this season, but until then, the music bookers at local venue The Grottos are taking up the slack. Since rising from the ashes of the Golden Horn, The Grottos has consistently made Monday the night for bluegrass, bringing in some outstanding talent for the sort of acoustic performances that suit the venue best.

Earlier this month, the San Francisco quintet The Hot Buttered Rum String Band provided the spark, mixing accordion and flute with a traditional string sound on original, lyrical tunes. Not too many witnessed Hot Buttered Rum's Monday night show, as it seems the nightlife behemoth that is Whiskey Rocks's Open-Mic Night still has a death grip on early-week entertainment. But it was a genuinely fun show that ended with one of the few covers of the "Dukes of Hazard" theme song I've ever heard.

Making a two-night run at The Grottos on Monday and Tuesday, March 1 and 2, will be The Packway Handle Band, an Athens, Georgia-based outfit that may be the best bluegrass act to come through town so far this season.

Formed in 2001, Packway Handle gained

enough notoriety on its home circuit to score an invite to the Telluride Bluegrass Festival Band Competition in 2002, where it took fourth place. But the band really broke through last year, taking third place at Telluride, winning the Miller Lite Local's Only band competition for the Southeast region, and earning the title "Athens's Best Bluegrass" from a local magazine.

THE FIVE-DAY BEYOND BLUEGRASS

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Now the band is on a month-long, mountain-town tour, hoping to spread the word about its first release, "Chaff Harvest." Sponsored in part by the win in the Miller Lite contest, the album is predominantly original material written by man-

dolin player and vocalist Michael Paynter, with a few traditional tunes tossed in. But in its live shows, Packway Handle likes to extend a little further past the bluegrass norm, says guitarist Josh Erwin, who also contributed two original songs to the album.

"We do a lot of just traditional bluegrass," Erwin told the Daily News in a phone interview from Athens, "but we also like to do some things that are a little different. We do some David Byrne like we do 'Psycho Killer' — and we also do a cover of 'The Cars.'"

Packway Handle's strength as a band is its cohesiveness. Vocal harmonies and string synco-pations lock together like Leggos on the "Chaff Harvest" high-energy tracks; as songwriters, the members of Packway Handle are creative and innovative. The quintet moves gracefully through catchy, unpredictable changes on "Throw Away the Key," a sophisticated and slightly mournful take on self-doubt, while "All the Time in the World," another original composition, highlights the band's vocal abilities as three voices melt together in supple harmonic bliss.

Packway Handle's musicianship also stands up to scrutiny. Erwin's composition "Shelva Ann" is a high-velocity pick-off that never hesitates, and "Tell It to Me" pushes the pace even more, but Packway Handle's sound also holds up on slow songs like "Cryin' Sorrows" or the traditional "In the Pines." And unlike some bluegrass bands that sound like they're missing something, fluid work by Chris Holliday on the standup bass and Erwin's rock-solid rhythm guitar make for a great foundation.

A week off from Open-Mic, anyone?