

Vaudeville's Back!

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The forgotten, encompassing American aesthetic has popped up in some recent old timey bands' music and stage shows.



The Ditty Bops.

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I like some theatrics when I see live music. I don't mean Whitesnake-style explosions, or Ozzy Osbourne throwing raw meat into a rabid crowd, but rather basic old-fashioned showmanship—three-part-harmonies, costume changes, strange instruments, dancing. When I turn on my stereo or pay 10 bucks to see a show I really want a *show*.

Like many people in my generation I'm easily distractible. Perhaps I want comedy and gunshots, but maybe I need politics and fluff—I change my mind quickly. Much like the audiences of the early 20th century, I desire multiple planes of entertainment, talent and genre—and when I experience music, I want the circus, the church, and the cabaret wrapped in one.

In other words—Vaudeville.

It's a vague and frequently misunderstood term, but Travis Stewart (AKA "Trav S.D."), author of [a book on the era](#), writes:

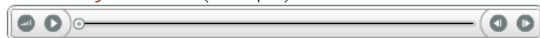
Over the course of a couple of hours a vaudeville audience might encounter singers, comedians, musicians, dancers, trained animals, female impersonators, acrobats, magicians, hypnotists, jugglers, contortionists, mind-readers, and a wide variety of strange uncategorizable performers usually lumped into the category of "nuts."

and:

In a vaudeville show you could have everything: from the puritanical to the licentious, from the patriotic to the anarchistic; from idolaters of wealth to egalitarians; and on and on...the hat rack in the dressing room had top hats, derby hats, fedoras, turbans, sombreros, bejeweled head-dresses and Apache war bonnets. All were equally important.

Though we're nearly a century removed from its heyday, the raucous three-ring spirit of vaudeville is still alive in some current "old-timey" acts. These are artists who wear many hats—and using their voices and their instruments they're magicians, doctors, activists, preachers and circus-train conductors all in one.

The Packway Handle Band (Athens, GA)



"Sinner, You Better Get Ready"

Fire, brimstone and one mic stand for the whole band. That's about all you need to know about this old-school bluegrass quintet who sing about graveyards, sin, resurrection and the great beyond like they really know what they're talking about. I saw them by accident a few years back at The Rodeo Bar in New York City and never forgot it: all five of them—Andrew Heaton on fiddle, Tom Baker on banjo, Michael Paynter on mandolin, Josh Erwin on guitar and Zach McCoy on upright bass—dancing, fighting, jockeying around that mic stand like there wasn't any electricity in the place. Though there were hundreds of people packed in there watching, it was like we were on someone's porch on a lazy Georgia afternoon in 1930.

With the bass player grooving in the back, the rest of the guys do something you don't see much any more: four-part harmony. With their railroad caps, overalls and scruffy beards, they reminded me of The Soggy Bottom Boys in *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* except these guys aren't joking. Rising stars in the East Coast bluegrass circuit, The Packway Handle Band mixes dark themes and old-time religion with a uniquely modern folk aesthetic that pins down just what American music is all about.