

## Greensky Bluegrass mark their Portland territory with two nights at Wonder Ballroom

Greensky Bluegrass

Michigan act Greensky Bluegrass, a Portland favorite. Chris Monaghan

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You can hardly (strictly) walk into a Portland bar without seeing someone pluck a banjo in a corner these days, which has been good news for Greensky Bluegrass. The Michigan band will play two nights at **Wonder Ballroom** this weekend, having built their Northwest fan base on relentless touring and the region's affection for roots music.

"Sometimes people ask me about where we do well," bassist Mike Devol said. "For a long time, I was able to draw the conclusion that it was this mountain lifestyle -- people where there were mountains, like in Colorado, were more naturally into bluegrass. I think that's not really the case in Portland."

Mount Hood's not so far, though, and Portland became "one of the first towns we came back to over and over," along with the **Northwest String Summit**, the summer event in North Plains, Oregon, where the group's become an institution.

"We headline on Thursday night, the big festival kick-off party," Devol said. "We have a tradition of being there."

The group's appeal is rising fast. On the morning we spoke, their latest album, "If Sorrows Swim," had topped the Billboard Bluegrass Chart in its debut week, a first for the band.

"Bluegrass is a pretty small world so we're no Katy Perry or anything, but it's awesome for us," Devol said.



The new album is the band's fifth, and it captures them in both energetic and bittersweet modes. "Demons" defies old tears-in-your-drink expectations: "Here's the rest of my beer/I'm going home with my demons," guitarist Dave Bruzza sings. "Forget Everything" paints what might be a romantic night with an escapist brush, while opener "Windshield" roars like it's calling festival crowds to join in. Such crowds have raced to hear roots-influenced crossover acts such as Mumford & Sons and the Avett Brothers lately, causing a ripple effect that's helped spread the word on acoustic music to the iPhone generation.

"I've been blown away in recent years to see the Avett Brothers just explode," Devol said, adding that his own act has found its footing in the jamgrass scene. "I feel like those bands have harnessed this great pop sensibility really well."

"I think that it does help," he added. "I think people see bands like the Avett Brothers, it gets them started on a path toward traditional, real, fundamental bluegrass and discovering the whole side of the world that we're based on."

While "Handguns," the band's last studio album, including 11-minute jam vehicle "All Four," "If Sorrows Swim" steps back from the group's all-out performances for a more nuanced, song-centered style.

"it's a more compositional approach," Devol said. "There's an approach to the layering, the entrances to the instruments. It's not everybody playing all the time."

Which in turn has made the group's live shows more varied, as fans will have a chance to see Friday and Saturday. Meanwhile, the band has its own reasons for spending a second day in town.

"We're big brunch fans as well, so Portland's a great place to come have brunch," he said, laughing. "We try to be there as often as possible."

*Greensky Bluegrass with Polecat, Wonder Ballroom, Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m. doors. Tickets: \$20-23, **Friday and Saturday, two-night pass \$35.***

-- David Greenwald

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