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Greensky Bluegrass thrives with an authentic sound

Jed Gottlieb Friday, January 19, 2018



Credit: Courtesy

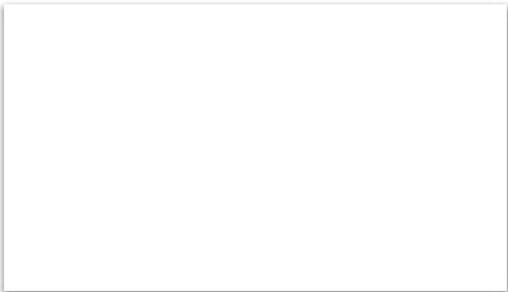
SEEKING INROADS: Paul Hoffman, above left, and the rest of Greensky Bluegrass will be at the House of Blues next week.

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It would be wrong to say Boston has no bluegrass scene — the weekly Monday bluegrass night at Atwood’s is almost an institution. But Boston can’t compete with Nashville, Tenn., or Asheville, N.C., or really anywhere in the South, Texas or Rocky Mountains. At the same time, the genre’s popularity has been growing with each passing year in the city.

“It was definitely a little tougher to make inroads into New England,” Greensky Bluegrass singer-songwriter-mandolinist Paul Hoffman said. “Some of that is because bluegrass is less familiar in New England. But some of that is because you already have so many musical choices. There are so many bands and so many cities to see music in.”

Even among the intense competition, a few of the genre’s stars will play marquee gigs in Boston over the next few months. Greensky plays the House of Blues Thursday with bluegrass up-and-comer Billy Strings. The next night, the Infamous Stringdusters take over the Paradise Rock Club. On March 16, I’m With Her, featuring Nickel Creek’s





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Sara Watkins and Massachusetts native Aoife O'Donovan, performs at Sanders Theater.

While the House of Blues is a huge rock club, it can't compete with headlining Red Rocks, the legendary amphitheater in Colorado (capacity 9,525), which Greensky sold out in September. But Hoffman says people shouldn't read too much into the band's Red Rocks success.

"While I agree bluegrass is bigger in Colorado, everyone does well at Red Rocks because people drive 300 miles just to see a show there," he said. "People are less likely to drive 300 miles to see something in New England because they don't need to."

Hoffman says his band and genre are doing just fine in Boston, even if he admits he's fuzzy about what that genre is.

Yes, the band has bluegrass right in the name, but traditionalists quarrel with the label. The old guard would call Greensky jamgrass or Americana or a rock 'n' roll band that doesn't have a drummer.

"I would say we are definitely a bluegrass band and definitely not a bluegrass band," Hoffman said, then laughing. "We do



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have the instrumentation, but we also go different places. For me, the songwriting comes first, then the instrumentation."

That devotion to songwriting is clear on the new album "Shouted, Written Down & Quoted." Hoffman's songs have a fresh feel — big arena rock hooks, tight pop turns, brief psychedelic and prog detours — as he sings about heartbreak and uncertainty.

"When I started writing music, I didn't want to write about being a coal miner or getting back to my mountain cabin. That just wasn't me, wasn't authentic," he said. "So while we are a string band, I try to make my writing personal and modern."

There are a few songs on "Shouted, Written Down & Quoted" that could pass as traditional tunes. But most fit better alongside the Avett Brothers or Mumford & Sons catalog than with dusty Flatt & Scruggs LPs, which could be why they've made so many inroads in so many places.

