

COMMON FOLK MUSIC

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Greensky Bluegrass – Handguns
October 4, 2011 by April

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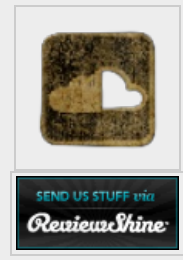
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Out of the gate, bluegrass records have an enormous sonic hurdle to jump: They have to be able to capture the listeners attention on the merits of the music alone. This sounds strange. Of course, any good record needs to do that — but bluegrass all the more. I’ll try to explain: Bluegrass shows are fantastic because of the spectacle — or, more precisely, the experience. It’s the experience of seeing Tony Rice or Chris Thile or, more recently, Sarah Jarosz or Andy Hall masterfully play their instruments that brings the real thrill in the genre. Virtuosity has that kind of “see-it-to-believe-it” element. These performances are almost always more exciting than the recorded versions which become, usually, representations of — anticipations for — the next time you can see the band or artist play. Almost always.

Greensky Bluegrass’s new record *Handguns* operates in much the same way. Indeed, there is some really astonishing playing on a few tracks — especially Anders Beck’s dobro and Michael Arlen Bont’s banjo shine on nearly every track — but on many of the others, well, it’s tough not to pine after one of their fantastic shows.

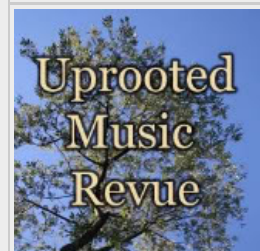
Starting with fairness, Greensky Bluegrass are a Kalamazoo, MI band without gimmicks. They play an easy mixture of bluegrass and alt-country that plays nicely on record — mandolinist Paul Hoffman’s voice fills out most tracks in a similar casual way. Indeed, they are certainly an easy band to listen to. Bands like Greensky have a tough row to hoe, however, for the same reason: there’s is no gimmick. No progressive tilt, no super-star player. This speaks a lot about their success as a group, then, and puts them in league with other bands cut from a similar cloth — Trampled By Turtles come to mind. And while not gimmicky, there are a few really cool things about *Handguns*: The title track “Handguns” has some really sweet lap-steel playing on it, and “I’d Probably Kill You” has a



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New Orleans-y horn section that feels, again, really at home on this otherwise grassy record. Also, don't miss the kazoo and parlor playing on the penultimate track, "Hot Dogs (On Parade)".

But, as their own press-release points out, *Handguns* may be best suited as a buy-at-the-show kind of release. To be clear, I really like this record. I've seen Greensky Bluegrass play two or three times and they are a fantastic live band. As such, *Handguns* is a well-produced representation of that great live sound. Fans will find this record a reminder of what they love about the band and new fans who find themselves at a Greensky show will find the purchase of *Handguns* at the merch table a great way to give the band the support it deserves.

- Jon Stone

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"Handguns"

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