

Josh Sweigert
jsweigert@tahodailytribune.com

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Greensky Bluegrass coming to North Tahoe before teaming with ‘the King’



Courtesy Jamie Van Buhle Greensky Bluegrass jams Thursday, March 14, in the Crystal Bay Casino Crown Room.

If you go

What: Greensky Bluegrass

When: 9 p.m. Thursday, March 14

Where: Crystal Bay Casino Crown Room

Tickets: \$15 in advance or \$18 on the day of the show, \$35 reserved booth

CRYSTAL BAY, Nev. — In the world of bluegrass and jamgrass music, Greensky Bluegrass is on the ascendant.

Currently on a tour that will see it play a legendary venue with a bluegrass icon, the Michigan quintet also is finalizing its fifth studio album and scheduling big name summer concert appearances at a dizzying pace.

One stop on the band's current tour is Thursday, March 14 in the Crystal Bay Casino Crown Room. The lads are Dave Bruzza (guitar), Anders Beck (dobro), Mike Devol (bass), Mike Bont (banjo) and Paul Hoffman (mandolin). They are developing a history at Crystal Bay, having played the Red Room in 2010 and the Crown Room in 2011 and 2012.

“We played after Yonder Mountain in the Red Room a few years back, that was kind of our intro to Tahoe,” Devol told Lake Tahoe Action. “We love it there, every time we come up there. I think Tahoe might be the greatest place, in a way. It’s awesome in the winter. We’ve been blessed enough to do some skiing there the last few years. And then in the summer, it’s even more awesome. It’s like ‘is that even possible?’ ”

As much as they enjoy a stop at Lake Tahoe, the band is just as amped for its show the following night. Greensky Bluegrass will take the stage at San Francisco’s storied Fillmore Auditorium on Friday, joined by bluegrass great Sam Bush.

“We’re incredibly excited,” Devol said. “We’re stoked to play the Fillmore, because it’s the Fillmore. Not to slight the Tahoe show, we love Crystal Bay, but somehow I feel like the Fillmore show is the big event on this tour, we feel like every day we’re kind of prepping ourselves for that experience.

“We were brainstorming to see what we could do to make the show really pop. We started talking to Sam about how cool it would be to have him be our fiddle player. We got in touch with him and it pretty much all just worked out. We’re playing some of our songs and some of his. I’m really looking forward to it.”

While this will be Greensky Bluegrass’s debut at the Fillmore, Bush has appeared there before, with his Sam Bush Band and as a member of Lyle Lovett’s band.

“I’ve only played there a few times but enough to get excited when the guys asked me to play with them,” the mandolin and fiddle player said. “When you think of the history of that room it’s pretty overwhelming.

Known by fans and fellow musicians as “The King of Newgrass,” Bush has been a driving force in the bluegrass world for decades. Formed in 1971, his band New Grass Revival helped rewrite the book on old time music, fusing it with rock, reggae and other elements and breathing new life into a decidedly rooted genre.

“We were influenced by guys who were already departing from traditional bluegrass: the Osbourne Brothers, the Dillards, the Country Gentlemen,” Bush told Lake Tahoe Action in 2011. “We did “Great Balls of Fire” on the first New Grass Revival album because we had seen Hartford & Campbell do it on TV.”

Bush was also behind the creation of Telluride Bluegrass Festival, one of the country’s premiere string band gatherings. It was there that Greensky Bluegrass earned its big break, winning the 2006 Telluride Band Competition and the coveted prize of a booking at the next year’s festival.

“That was definitely a starting point for what we’re doing now,” Bruzza told the Action in 2011.

Formed in 2000 in Kalamazoo, Mich., the band came together out of a group of friends playing around a local music scene.

“Three of us were playing open mics about 10 or 11 years ago, it just became a fun thing,” Bruzza said in 2011. “We started playing at local shows and then about five years ago things just sort of took off.”

After the breakthrough success at Telluride, Greensky Bluegrass grew a name on the bluegrass and jamgrass circuit, returning to that festival, High Sierra Music Festival, Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, and the Northwestern String Summit, among many others.

So far, this year has been no different, with the band balancing work on their fifth studio album with the demands of a heavy tour schedule.

“We recorded it in the end of January, still in the mixing process,” Devol said. “The album is self-produced. We worked with the same engineer we worked with on ‘Handguns’, his name is Glenn Brown. He’s working on the mixers right now. We’re on tour, so we can’t be in there listening with him. He makes the mix for us, and we listen and make notes for him.”

As yet untitled, the follow-up album to 2011’s “Handguns” is chock full of new music, still unheard by the public.

“The material is generally much newer,” Devol said. “With some of our last albums, ‘Handguns’ you know, some of the stuff had been tested live for a period of time. With this one, we’ve got eight or nine songs that likely no one has heard at all. There are a few songs on the album that we have been playing for a few months, but as far as the really new ones we’re still not playing them, until we have a release tape for the album.”

The bass player noted the challenge of sitting on new material in that fashion.

“It’s hard, it’s a real act of self-control,” he said. “You have to learn it to record it, and then you’ve recorded it but you’re not playing it live for months, so there’s a period of remembering it and relearning it. Some of the material is so new that we were literally arranging it on the same day we were beginning to record it in studio.”

Devol said that the band approached the new album with less of an emphasis on arranging tunes in a traditional bluegrass fashion.

“I think a lot of the intention that made this album different came in that early phase; not treating it texturally like it had to be a bluegrass tune,” he said. “We’re playing bluegrass instruments, but we’re not always playing bluegrass. We’re just trying to make music that we care about and that we think our fans will care about, and that little baby puppies will like.”

Fans and puppies alike will have ample opportunity to see Greensky Bluegrass in the coming months, as the band has recently announced appearances at a number of popular summer music events.

“We’re at the String Summit again in Portland, up at Hornings Hideout. It’s Yonder (Mountain String Band)’s yearly festival, we’ve been doing that a lot over the last few years,” Devol said. “We just announced Red Rocks (Music Festival), we’re playing that with our good friends Railroad Earth. We announced Telluride (Bluegrass Festival) recently, we’re pretty stoked about that.”

It comes as no surprise to Bush that Greensky Bluegrass is in such high demand nationally. They’re following the path that he and others blazed, reworking traditional string music with their own soul and flavor.

“I got to know them a little better last year at Bigsky Bluegrass in Montana,” Bush said. “Then getting to sit in with them at their set at Telluride this year. They’re not just a bluegrass band, and it’s not your dad’s bluegrass. One of the things I really like about Greensky is the variety, knowing how to pay homage to the traditions of bluegrass but making your own music. That’s just one of the reasons that I think people are enjoying them so much.”

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