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Jam Central Station 10.15.11: Buzzworthy Album Review - Greensky Bluegrass - Handguns

Posted by Jeff Modzelewski on 10.15.2011

The Michigan bluegrass band comes out firing with their new album

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Hey everyone. Hope you're having a good week. I'm getting ready to check out The Werks tonight (Friday) in Cleveland, and then I've got Umphrey's McGee next week at the House of Blues. Good week. Anyways, here we go!

The Headliners



For the past few years, Greensky Bluegrass have been working their way up the ranks of the modern bluegrass scene. Since coming out of Kalamazoo Michigan 10 years ago, they've become well known throughout the "newgrass" music scene as talented musicians and solid songwriters. They've gone from a well-known regional band to landing spots on national jam band and bluegrass festivals. *Handguns*, their first studio album in three years, goes a long way to solidify their place as a bluegrass band to be reckoned with.

There are a lot of things to like about this new album. Over the course of 14 tracks and over an hour of music, the album hits on both traditional and contemporary bluegrass. Despite being a lengthy album, it doesn't get stale. The band also does a great job of mixing up some fun drinking and party songs with some more serious subjects. They obviously want to be looked at as more than just a bluegrass group, and they certainly have the songwriting ability to go beyond "basic" bluegrass. However, that doesn't mean that they abandon what has gotten them this far. While the new styles and the modern songwriting of the album might not be a traditional bluegrass fan's cup of tea, they certainly add enough old-time elements to entice a straight bluegrass fan to give them a shot. There's a lot of good on this album, and very little to criticize.

First and foremost, they do a very good job of mixing up the songs on the album. The lead track, "Don't Lie," has a great, bright feel to it. Other tracks such as "Cold Feet," "No Idea," "Better Off," and even the rather silly "Hot Dogs (On Parade)" echo that type of positive musical energy. Not all of these tracks deal with positive subject matter, but the style is primarily a fast picking bouncy bluegrass dance party.

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Greensky has been known as a high-energy, fun live band, and these really are the tracks on the album that reflect that.

But where I think this album really shines is when things take a darker (and often less traditional) turn. "Before Bring Out Your Dead" and "Bring Out Your Dead" is my favorite part of the album. "Before" would never be considered a bluegrass song, and "Bring Out Your Dead" is definitely on the forefront of the "newgrass" movement. "Jaywalking" starts out with a very old-time sounding intro before heading into what sounds to me like a classic drinking song. "Handguns" is in a similar vein, and I could definitely see these tracks on a jukebox in a smoky bar somewhere in rural Michigan. They even mix things up by adding some New Orleans jazzy horns to "I'd Probably Kill You."

What is probably most surprising about the songwriting on the album, however, is the length of the songs. Over half of the album is near or over 5 minutes, and two of the tracks are over 7 minutes. This just isn't what you would hear in traditional bluegrass, although it works for this album. They also do a great job for the most part of keeping the songs moving in the longer songs so they don't seem repetitive.

As far as the lyrics goes, the band again does a great job of mixing up the positive with the poignant and even the humorous. Michigan has been one of the hardest hit states by the current economic downturn, and "Lose My Way" is a great story about how that affects the people of the area. The theme of the song really reminds me of **John Mellencamp's** "Scarecrow," and it's a theme that millions of people can relate to. However, some of the darker songs also end up with a hopeful message. "Beauty and Pain" is a great example of balancing loss and failure with satisfaction in the journey, turning around what starts out as a sad song. "Blood Sucking F(r)ends" and "I'd Probably Kill You" are both songs dealing with betrayal and revenge, although both have a certain amount of humor behind them as well. This mix of songwriting styles means that the album isn't quite as cohesive thematically as it could be, but it adds a lot of diversity and keeps things interesting.

My only concern about this album really is the length. There's simply a lot to digest with this album. While all of it is very good, I feel they could've cut a couple of tracks (probably the final two), closed the album with "Bring Out Your Dead," and been just fine. The length just makes it very hard for me to see myself putting this album on and listening to it straight through on a regular basis. A little additional self-editing wouldn't have hurt at all, and might have made for a stronger overall album.

But while too much of a good thing isn't always good, it's better than too much of a bad thing. Despite being a little excessive in length, the album is a collection of solid tracks that is a great representation of where Greensky Bluegrass is going and why they're among the leaders of the newgrass movement. *Handguns* has its fun moments, its heavy moments, and quite a bit in between. This is an album that bluegrass fans will enjoy (the album debuted at #3 on the bluegrass charts), as well as fans of Greensky's more progressive sound. These guys should see a lot of continued success from this album.



From The Road