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Not Quite Traditional

Pokey LaFarge, Greensky Bluegrass and other retro stuff

[\(July 21, 2011\)](#) The year may be 2011, but you wouldn't necessarily know it fashion-wise. Retro is in, particularly styles from the '30s and '40s. **Pokey LaFarge**, a neo-trad artist on the rise who headlines Saturday's Jefferson State Old Time Review at the Arcata Playhouse, has a fine-tuned retro sartorial sense (also imposed on his band **The South City Three**, who I'm told would be in jeans and T-shirts if left on their own). His records sound like something that might be spinning at 78rpm, yet he's as current as anything.

Why retro? "You could just say some things seem to work," he said, calling from the road. (He and the band just returned from Europe, but they're not stopping.) "For me, the reason I've always worn old clothes or played old music is because it's better: better made, better quality, made by people not by machines."



Pokey LaFarge and the South City Three

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And it's definitely not about jumping on some lifestyle bandwagon. "It's about getting back to the basics of life. We live in a space world now with machines doing everything. It doesn't make people feel whole, or feel human. This music, folk music, or music of the people, makes you feel human. I think a lot of music of today distracts you from being human. That's not all bad, but I prefer down-home soul, country music. You need an anchor to know where you actually come from."

In Pokey's case you could say that's St. Louis, but he's really from a timeless place. His new album title, *Middle of Everywhere*, says a lot. Catch his act at the Playhouse; you'll know where you are.

Start with the name: **Greensky Bluegrass**. It's a puzzle. You know the sky is blue, not green. Does that mean they're not exactly a bluegrass band, more on the green-grass side? The lineup — **Paul Hoffman** on mandolin, **Anders Beck** dobro, **Michael Arlen Bont** banjo, **Dave Bruzza** guitar, **Mike Devol** upright bass — fits the traditional Bill Monroe bluegrass instrumental array. But these guys are more likely to cover a Pink Floyd song than a Bluegrass Boys tune and mostly they play their own songs.

The lyrics on their new album, *Handguns*, are rock solid, drawing influence from Robert Hunter and bands like New Riders in songs often touching on tradition, but from a non-trad perspective. "Old barns don't tear down. Let them stand proud until they fall to the ground," they sing in Paul Hoffman's "Old Barns." His song "Middle Mountain Towns" tells of a country in transition and speaks of learning to get by "without the corporate phenomenon of greed."

While they have not gone corporate, the band from Kalamazoo has been on the rise of late, working the jam festival world big time. Since winning the Telluride Bluegrass Festival band contest in 2006, they've been touring relentlessly, moving up in the circuit until playing Bonnaroo this spring. Around the time this paper comes out they're playing the Northwest String Summit at Horning's Hideout, then they head south, stopping to do a show at Humboldt Brews on Tuesday.

Another act returning to Humboldt Brews (fresh from the Trinity Tribal Stomp): saxophone playing brother **Charles Neville** and kora player **Youssoupha Sidibe** with the **Mystic Rhythms Band**, who manage to meld New Orleans and African traditions with reggae beats in deep improv. Very cool.

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[Fortuna Redwood AutoXpo](#)

STAFF PICK / events / 7 a.m. Fortuna Main Street and Rohner Park. Shiny. Fast. Loud. Yup. The Redwood AutoXpo revs up Fortuna. redwoodautoxpo.com. 725-3916.

[Fiona Ryder and a few *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*](#)

music / 7 p.m. Cassical program includes Greek songs by Ravel and arias by Massenet, Bellini and Puccini, accompanied by pianist John Chernoff. Also, performances by members of Humboldt Light Opera's *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. hollyyashi.com. 822-5132.

[The Hot Rods \(rock 'n' roll\)](#)

music / 9 p.m. Blue Lake Casino, 777 Casino Way. The Hot Rods are a get-up-and-dance musical tribute to the early days of Rock and Roll. 668-9770.

[Killbot Factory, Knot Theyre](#)

music / 9:30 p.m. Arcata Theatre Lounge, 1036 G St. \$3. 822-1220.

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