

Spreading the word fuels band on the move

By [Kevin Joy](#)

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Sometimes, even a single day of rest is a luxury for mandolin player Paul Hoffman.

His band, Greensky Bluegrass, spends much of the year as road warriors, touting neo-bluegrass stylings.

Audiences range from those at niche parties and casual club shows to those at high-profile events such as the Bonnaroo festival — a wooded, mixed-genre bacchanal better-known for Top 40 headliners such as Kings of Leon and Lil Wayne.

“We push ourselves a lot harder than we should,” Hoffman, 29, said during a recent day off before the start of another East Coast tour. “I would hermit out for weeks if I could.”

But the variety of venues — and a touring pace as swift as the band’s rapid-fire, finger-picking licks — is deliberate.

“We’re constantly encountering people who tell us they never listened to bluegrass before they stumbled upon us,” Hoffman said from the group’s home base in Kalamazoo, Mich.

“Our show is rock ‘n’ roll and jam and bluegrass and everything.”

Had he not been a founding member, Hoffman might have become an unlikely devotee.

A lifelong guitar player once loyal only to “Phish concerts and Phish festivals,” he knew little of the instrument (or genre) until he heard bluegrass mandolinist David Grisman play at Hookahville — a biannual Ohio festival spearheaded by Columbus jam band Ekoostik Hookah.

Hoffman’s pool of high-school graduation money was quickly scraped together to purchase an instrument.

As a student at Western Michigan University, he met guitarist Dave Bruzza and banjo player Michael Arlen Bont at an open-mic night.

The trio clicked.

“I was in the right place at the right time,” Hoffman said. “Suddenly, I



FILE PHOTO

The members of the band Greensky Bluegrass, from left: Dave Bruzza, Paul Hoffman, Mike Devol, Michael Arlen Bont and Anders Beck

dedicated my life to playing the mandolin.”

As their craft took shape and membership grew, the men (plus recent additions in upright-bass player Mike Devol and resonator guitarist Anders Beck) began to accumulate prizes and press accolades.

The forthcoming *Handguns* EP was recorded with warm-sounding vintage tapes and equipment, including the console that captured Lynyrd Skynyrd’s iconic *Free Bird*.

The recorded work reveals that the band’s obvious chemistry is bolstered by complex melodies and layered vocals whose delicately entwined sum seems almost intrinsic.

Still, “A little bit of it is formulaic,” said Hoffman, who takes the lead on most Greensky Bluegrass tunes, composing on the guitar before transferring his efforts to the mandolin.

“We all sort of know our roles and what to expect of each other.”

In concert, plenty of room exists for improvisation — and jokes, too.

Along with decades-old traditional tunes, the group is known for its unorthodox covers, including spins on pop hits by Arcade Fire, Bruce Hornsby, Prince and Lionel Richie. (A cover of *Dancing on the Ceiling* is a particular achievement, Hoffman said.)

Dedication has also contributed to the success, as evidenced by the nonstop routine.

“The formula is: Play a show in this market, gain fans; come back, gain more fans.”

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