

Band meshes old, new for timeless mystery

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Clawhammer (from left): Jason Childress, Lisa Wilson, Chelsea Childress, Chris Peterson / September Childress

Written by
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For the News-Leader

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A simple old-timey banjo vamp sets a quaint feel, but a stomp rhythm steers the tune into creepy territory. A gruff voice chants a song title's demand — "Set me free!" — and menacingly frail women's voices echo the calls.

Moments later, a grinding whine of distortion steadily overtakes the piece, building to something like a thunderous ringing in the ears, suggesting a psychotic or fatal event may be just around the corner.

What's going on? Should we shudder, laugh, both, other?

"I think it's a good thing to be a little mysterious in a song, ambiguous. The more people think about something, it stays it in their brain, percolates through more," said Jason Childress, who

Hear Clawhammer

Where: Lindbergs, 318 W. Commercial St.

When: 9 p.m. Saturday

Call: 417-868-8900

integrates these old and new elements.

If you are looking for answers, check out Clawhammer on Saturday at Lindbergs. The band also has a recent, self-titled 7-inch album on Wee Rock Records of Springfield.

The group melds pre-bluegrass music with contemporary styles and technology. Childress and Chris Peterson switch off among banjo, guitar, bass and percussion. Childress excels at banjo and conducting loop samples, Peterson at playing bass and providing the funky, jazzy beats that they mesh with rustic materials.

Jason Childress' wife, Chelsea Childress, cultivates the eerie vocals from old-time recordings and brings vintage clothing to the look of the band. The fourth member, Lisa Wilson, who is on a lengthy hiatus, has contributed duet voicings with Chelsea Childress.

The ghostly effects from old-time recordings were due to the tools, not because the singers were trying to be Halloweenish. "Those old recordings have such a neat sound. The old equipment is real lo-fi by today's standards, but you can kind of replicate it using the hi-fi effects — lots of reverb," Jason Childress said.

The band also embraces the minimalist structure of the old songs, as well as their themes of sin, wrongdoing and consequences. The song "Hell" is about the destination where the voice in the song expects to arrive as a result of a vague but horrible act.

The old-time, one-chord songs, often sustained by a simple repeating pattern, force the musicians to be more creative, Jason Childress said.

“In one way, you’re limited, but in another way, it kind of makes things more interesting, because you have to think about it,” he said. “How can I make it really interesting just using one chord?”

Jason Childress said he found a connection between old-time music and the one-chord vamp of classic funk, such as Sly and the Family Stone. “Hell,” among many other Clawhammer originals, benefits from this fusion.

The loop sampler opened up new creative avenues, he said. He and Peterson work together to perform a brief sequence that they sample using a foot pedal. Once that sequence is looped, the musicians move on to other parts and instruments. All the samples and loops are executed live.

The electronics serve the song by intensifying the emotional experience to melodramatic or horror-movie proportions. But above all, the stories drive the songs, he said, as in “Hell.”

“What’s going on here? We don’t even know. Someone’s been murdered, but you don’t know why, exactly,” he said. “There’s a lot of questions to be answered there.”