

MUSIC

Sir, your child is doodling on my banjo

Playing for toddlers and hungover hipsters is okay, but local bluegrass musicians are looking to bust free of the brunch scene

LARA ZARUM

A wide-eyed toddler in tiny Converse sneakers stares at three beards congregated around a single microphone. With no cords in their way, the fiddle, guitar and banjo players trade places at the mic with ease.

The little girl in the Converse is mesmerized. A man with an auburn beard and red flannel shirt shoots out an arm to stop her from climbing up onstage.

It's the Unseen Strangers' first Sunday matinee at the Gladstone and the tables have been packed all afternoon. The five-piece group formed in Halifax in 2006 and steadily gigged their way to a Music Nova Scotia Award for "Country/Bluegrass Recording of the Year" in 2009. Now they've moved to Toronto and are taking a well-trod path.

When the Unseen Strangers arrived here in early 2010, they joined a slew of young musicians taking advantage of a burgeoning bluegrass scene. But in Toronto, bluegrass's popularity is narrow in scope, often relegated to Sunday-morning brunch accompaniment. And in the few venues that book the genre, the city's new generation of bluegrass musicians struggle to be appreciated as contemporary artists, as opposed to a novelty act for bleary-eyed bohos coming off a bender, or — as at the Dakota — laid-back parents and their tiny groovy children. ("You put kids in front of a banjo playing at 500 miles an hour, they go crazy," says local mandolin player Andrew Collins.)

"It reminds me of classical guitar gigs," grins Ben Wright, guitarist in the Free Whiskey String Band. "You're just that guy in the corner."

Like the Unseen Strangers in their hometown of Halifax, Free Whiskey enjoyed a musical monopoly at home until they moved from Kingston and had to compete with other groups for a limited downtown audience.

The Slocan Ramblers view the Dakota Tavern as "a rite of passage" for the city's bluegrass



The Unseen Strangers play the Smiling Buddha Bar this Thursday. Brunch will not be served. KRISSE MYERS

bands, but the group has yet to play the popular country bar at night. While the Unseen Strangers have played a handful of shows at smaller clubs in Kensington Market, they're hoping to inch a little closer to the centre of the Queen West hub with venues like the Rivoli and the Hideout.

"Bars in Toronto have certain images they have to maintain," Free Whiskey bass player Tim O'Reilly says. In the band's hometown, the musical landscape is far less complicated. "In Kingston," Mr. Wright says, "any bar with live music is a bar you should be playing at."

Most bluegrass bands find receptive crowds away from the hype of the city. Summer festivals, like New Brunswick's Sunseeker and Evolve in Nova Scotia, provide a welcome relief from the grind of the brunch circuit.

For Daniel Latner, fiddle player for the Unseen Strangers, they of-

fer a chance to play to crowds who appreciate their contemporary take on the genre: "At a festival, people get it."

Performing for kids and their harried parents, on the other hand, can prove less satisfying. "I don't feel the brunch is a great gig in terms of connecting with the audience," Mr. Collins admits. Mandolin player Adrian Gross of the Slocan Ramblers agrees the brunch crowd is "not the most attentive audience." But working musicians aren't about to pass up a paying job. "These are the gigs where people are probably making more money," Mr. Latner notes.

Outside the window at the Gladstone, the relentless Queen West construction is a reminder that we ain't on the farm. And the Unseen Strangers aren't pretending to be cowboys. They'll interrupt themselves for an instrumental breakdown of *I Like*

To Move It, or indulge in a rendition of Weezer's *Pink Triangle*.

Toronto's bluegrass musicians share this sense of humour, along with a sense of community: after producing their second album, Mr. Collins introduced the Unseen Strangers to Free Whiskey, and Mr. Wright lived with Mr. Gross for a short time upon moving to the city last summer. They may have found a challenge in navigating Toronto's bluegrass scene, but they've also found each other.

Mr. Latner introduces the last song of the night and signs off: "We're from the Internet but we live in Toronto now. Have a good night. Here's a song about killing your wife."

The Unseen Strangers play the Smiling Buddha Bar (961 College St.) on June 9.

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FIND SOME BLUEGRASS

The Dakota Tavern
249 Ossington Ave.

Over the past few years, the Dakota has become ground zero for bluegrass in Toronto. The bar features live music every day of the week, but their calling card is the wildly popular Bluegrass Brunch on Sundays from 11-3.

The Silver Dollar Room
486 Spadina Ave.

This College and Spadina haunt has long been a haven for country and folk musicians. Every week they host High Lonesome Wednesdays with local bluegrass heroes Crazy Strings.

Gladstone Hotel
1214 Queen St. W.

Grab a drink and some grub at the Gladstone's Bluegrass Sundays, a weekly matinee in the hotel's homey Melody Bar.

The Tranzac
292 Brunswick Ave.

The Annex staple features Bluegrass & Oldtime night every Thursday in the cozy Southern Cross Lounge.

Cloak and Dagger
394 College St.

The Slocan Ramblers host a bluegrass night every Tuesday at this casual College Street pub.

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