

Pop Talk: The Avett Brothers venture into uncharted territory

by *George_Varga*

As good as the Avett Brothers' brand of genre-leaping American roots music is, it almost pales compared to some of the eyebrow-raising attempts to describe how it sounds.

THE AVETT BROTHERS - The Avett Brothers recently earned three American Music Association Award nominations, including an Album of the Year nod. Pictured, from left, are Scott Avett, Bob Crawford and Seth Avett. CNS Photo courtesy of Crackerfarm. "Post-Civil War modern rock," gushed one historically challenged music critic. "Grungegrass," proclaimed another. Web sites are no more accurate, with Amazon.com calling the North Carolina group "a decidedly non-bluegrass trio," while USA Today called it "wild-eyed post bluegrass" and the ever-inaccurate Wikipedia described the Avetts as "a non-traditional bluegrass band."

Not to be outdone, Harp magazine recently hailed the trio as "the world's greatest bluegrass punk band," while The Washington Post described the group's live shows as sounding like "Robert E. Lee singing (with) The Ramones." One newspaper, whose spell-check program apparently doesn't include numerical accuracy, hailed the trio for achieving the "unhinged passion of two Jack Whites."

The Avetts' MySpace page doesn't help much. It states that the group's music "sounds like" the Violent Femmes, the Everly Brothers and Alice in Chains.

"I don't know what genre we should be listed in," admitted singer, banjo player and sometime drummer Scott Avett, who shares vocal and instrumental duties with his guitar-playing brother, Seth, bassist Bob Crawford, and - on their current tour - cellist Joe Kwon.

Like many musicians before them, the Avetts were raised on punk and metal, two styles they mixed in their post-high school band, Nemo.

But even before Nemo, their love as teenagers for The Clash and Led Zeppelin was rivaled by their discovery of Doc Watson, Jimmie Rodgers and Woody Guthrie. So when Scott and Seth formed an acoustic offshoot group, which they dubbed The Backporch Project Downstairs, their emphasis was on earthy instrumental pickin' and singin', not headbanging or moshing.

But when the Avett Brothers became a going concern in early 2002, their budding musical hybrid saw them start to fuse rustic roots music with punk attitude and rock 'n' roll fire. The result earned them the first in a constantly growing cult of fans - and looks of bewilderment or outright horror from bluegrass and old-time music traditionalists.

"We used to play in traditional bluegrass situations," said Scott, 31, who earned degrees in communications and fine arts before devoting himself fully to music. "And we'd be insulted and surprised when people said: 'This isn't bluegrass! What are you doing here? This isn't worth a ...'"

"But I'm very proud our music is original, and I'm willing to put the extra work in to do it. Because the longer it takes, the longer it will stick."

There was lots of sticking, of the perspiration-fueled kind, when Scott and his bandmates performed in late April in a sweltering tent at the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival in Indio, Calif.

But if the group's concerts are marked by a raucous spirit and its uproarious, seat-of-the-pants stage show - think "Hee-Haw" on speed - its superb new album, "Emotionalism," is something else altogether.

Easily the trio's most confident and accomplished album to date, it's filled with lovely, stirring songs that - at their best - suggest what The Beatles might have sounded like if its members grew up in backwoods Tennessee instead of Liverpool. The 14-song album, which includes the ebullient "Pretty Girl from San Diego," is also more polished than the band's previous releases, without ever sounding slick or sterile.

"We really wanted to do more with some of our earlier recordings and just didn't know how to go about it," Scott said, speaking from his home in Concord, N.C. "On our latest album we worked with an engineer and producer who could get things we'd ask for or want, but could never get in the past.

"There's no question that you learn by doing. If you follow the progression of our live shows and recordings, there's no doubt."

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