

Country Melvins mix country, punk metal

Story by Christopher Heine

Art by Matt Haney

The Country Melvins are the anti-Osmonds of family bands.

Their most receptive audience has been punk-rock hipsters — a social group whose members typically have a mind-set capable of giving passive, yet thoughtful consideration to the romanticism in nihilism.

The band's audience is appropriately complex for a group of two brothers and a couple of cousins who musically embrace their contradictions.

Bob Melvin said his Chicago-based group played "abrasive" yet "old American music."

"A mix of old-time country and punk-rock metal," he said. "Soft ears don't like us."

The Country Melvins will perform their hybrid set of hard-edged country and bluegrass tunes at Knickerbocker's Tavern, 901 O St., Friday in a show beginning at 10 p.m. It will be the band's second show at the venue.

One thing the group makes perfectly clear is

the rural, yesteryear approach of the band.

The Country Melvins sound as if the notes and words in their songs have crawled out of the ashtray of a long-dead pickup truck.

Bob and Bud Melvin have baritone voices that character actor Billy Bob Thornton would love to lift for future backwoods Arkansas scenes.

Humble in manner, yet apparently flamboyant and unified in musical attack, they explain their philosophy in a manner that would excite any red-blooded Johnny Cash fan.

"We're kind of dark and gloomy" and "we all grew up listening to country" were phrases repeated by all three interviewed band members.

The Melvin family's roster is indicative of a country band.

Bob sings and plays guitar, Bud is a banjo player, Darla is a fiddler and Jethro handles the percussion.

Darla Melvin said family togetherness is important to her band's music.

"I think a part of what we do comes from the fact that we are from the same place," she said. "The family thing allows us to push the things we want and be as weird as we want."

Bob Melvin, lyricist for the quartet, said family issues are present in their dark music.

"I think there are a lot of things in the songs

Concert Preview The Facts

Who: The Country Melvins, with the Dark

Townhouse Band and the Black Dahlias

Where: Knickerbockers, 901 O St.

When: Friday at 9:30 p.m.

Cost: \$3

The Skinny: Chicago's Country Melvins headline a rare bill of quirky, pre-1950s-influenced bands

that I've taken from remembering family," he said. "You know — how people relate to their father, Jesus Christ or somebody they've killed."

Bob Melvin said his band tends to scare people because of its idiosyncratic melding of old-school country and bluegrass sounds with a punk-rock tough mentality.

Originality has its price and profits.

The band, while building a solid fan base in the diverse Chicago scene, hasn't been as lucky on the road.

"We tend to wipe out about 80 percent of the room," he said. "Although the people who do stay sometimes end up coming to the stage after we are done, and they almost embarrass us with flattery."

Audiences tend to more readily accept new bands that sound familiar or even imitate popular groups and genres. Inventive, off-kilter groups often displease or perplex casual music listeners.

Darla Melvin said the band's originality is partly to blame for its lack of popularity.

The band has been unable to find a music niche to explain or categorize their band, she said.

"We bend the rules quite a bit," she said. "The whole problem with the alternative-country genre is that it is so constricting. Our band doesn't fit that label and where it's going."

Darla Melvin said the bad or awkward receptions do not discourage the group.

"People love us or they hate us," she said. "The reaction is usually extreme, which is good. At least people don't think we're boring."

Knickerbockers part-owner Sean Tyrrell said The Country Melvins are the type of band that not everyone understands right away.

"Yeah, they're pretty different," he said. "But they put on such a great show that most people won't forget."

In contrast to its humble touring success, the group's raw, hillbilly-like sound has earned it packed crowds at two of Chicago's hip, arty nightclubs, The Empty Bottle and Lounge Ax.

"We like straightforward, honest people," Bob Melvin said. "I think we fit in OK here because Chicagoans don't seem real happy, but they're honest."

Bob Melvin said the move to Chicago changed his group's sound, because his group incorporated more electric elements into their music.

"I think maybe we did it partly to compete with the louder bands we were playing with," he said. "We used to be more acoustic and orchestrated."

"Now we're a little more stripped-down and abrasive. People will come up and tell us 'That's not easy to listen to.'"

The Country Melvins started playing together four years ago when the members lived in Darla's and Jethro's hometown of Stoney Creek, Tenn.

Bob and Bud Melvin originally moved to Tennessee from western New York. They recognized a southern influence on their already rootsy musical tastes that they had developed back east.

"It was good for me, because it exposed me to a lot of real country musicians, where music was a real part of their lives," Bud Melvin said.

"They weren't really thinking about careers and stuff like that, they were just playing for playing's sake I guess."

Judging the comments of the group, it seems as though the Country Melvins are carrying on the rugged, western individualism in Chicago that personifies old country music.

"Growing up, that's all we really heard on the radio — Johnny Cash and Hank Williams," Bob Melvin said. "So we understand the style better than others."

Occasionally, the band gets word that its throwback vibe has been felt.

"We've had 60-year-old couples come up to us and say: 'That's the real country,'" Bob Melvin said.

HARD CORE COUNTRY GLAN

