

Something Old, Something New

Musicians, fans look to distant past for ideas, inspiration

By CHRISTOPHER HEINE
Staff Writer

The Black Dahlias finished their fourth song, "Ruins of Hollywood," two weeks ago at Knickerbocker's Tavern.

Kristin Bailey, who plays the saw and sings for the six-piece band, slid green protective goggles over her eyes.

The Lincoln group started its fifth song, "Hound Dog Rain."

Bailey, 32, whipped her hand back over her shoulder and fired beer bottle upon beer bottle into a steel bucket.

This created messy and dramatic percussion in the center of the stage. Surprisingly, the glass splinters affected no one around her.

Her fiancée, Charles Lieurance,

crooned and screamed his lyrics with a twang in his voice.

Lieurance, 36, sat just in front of Bailey with his eyes closed and lips pressed against a bulky, Hank Williams-era microphone.

A fiddler, an accordion player, a drummer, an acoustic guitarist and a bass player — all seated around the couple — stomped their feet while their torsos swayed with their swinging heads to the mid-tempo beat.

The song ended with Bailey chugging a Budweiser and hurriedly crashing the bottle into the bucket to accent the song's last note. The crowd of 75 clapped, whistled and hollered.

Lieurance, the group's songwriter, said the Black Dahlias's music is constructed like old country songs, and the lyrics are based on original pre-World War II fables.

"I just really love those crusty, archetypal songs based on ruins and southern gothic," Lieurance said. "I just want to be able to plug into that dark country folklore, which are a circle of old stories about southern gothic and death and ruins and hillbilly."

"We've kind of combined our punk-rock pasts with the death and ruins stuff. I'm really enamored with writing these sort of songs."

And he's definitely not alone.

The Black Dahlias are among a legion of new bands that do most everything the old way. Such groups play country-folk, bluegrass and hillbilly music that is largely based on pre-1950s southern mystique.

These dated musical forms have been melded with new and idiosyncratic approaches by aging punk rockers now in their late 20s and early 30s.

Much of this resurgence has been spearheaded by Australian punk musician Nick Cave. A John Steinbeck aficionado, Cave has released a slew of recent albums with ballads that swoon and stomp in a tone born before FM radio.

He sounds like "Oklahoma!" musical with post-modern noise elements similar in effect to Bailey's beer-bottle antics.

A considerable number of veteran punk musicians have followed Cave's example. They've given up the loud rock amplifiers of their

youth to write songs that sound more of their grandparents' era.

Live music venues and 20-and-30-something crowds have been taking note.

Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St., was once a live-music venue which predominately showcased punk or post-modern rock groups.

The bar in recent years has broadened its niche to include the growth of groups with country and hillbilly influences.

A Sunday night show a week and a half ago might have been the best evidence to the success of the club's move.

More than 100 packed the bar and listened and watched The Meat Purveyors and Split Lip Rayfield perform their hillbilly and bluegrass tunes.

Bill Andersen is the acoustic guitar player for The Meat Purveyors, who are based in Austin, Texas. He used to play in the obscure punk band Poison 13.

Andersen said hillbilly music was refreshing after years of punk rock.

"I just got sick of all the loud rock," he said. "This was something that was really challenging. It was like learning a new language. And I'm probably having more fun with this than I've ever had before."

Andy Fairbairn has been entertainment director at Duffy's for more than four years. Audiences have tired of the narcissistic, lyrical ranting by bands of the early 1990s, Fairbairn said.

"People wanted better-written songs about different things other than the heart on the singer's sleeve," he said. "Not everyone wants to hear someone else's pain, and musicians started taking note."

Most importantly, Fairbairn said, bands like the Black Dahlias, Meat Purveyors and Split Lip Rayfield have established their own identities.

"These new bands aren't just copying the bands from the 1940s or 50s," he said. "They're learning things about writing good songs from them. But they're applying influences like Nick Cave and Lou Reed and

meshing it all together and the results are pretty cool."

The Black Dahlias displayed a contradiction in fashion pertaining to their modern take on a backwoods-and-hellfire sound. Their attire didn't fit the image of a band that's heavily influenced by the earlier half of this century.

Osh-kosh B'Gosh outfits and funny beards were nowhere to be found. They wore a modern mish-mash of suits, evening gowns, and clean T-shirts. They joked in between songs with the crowd of 75 as if they were a big, college-educated family.

With the exception of bass player Terry Peiper's greasy jet-black hair and skin and bones physique, the group lacked the rough, whiskey-smelling image of a real hillbilly band.

The Meat Purveyors at least wore as much faded Levi Strauss as they could seemingly get on their bodies, and Split Lip Rayfield donned oily, seasoned farm hats.

When the Black Dahlias busted into one of their musical rip-roars, however, they sounded raw enough for one to imagine real hillbillies. The odd combination of their attire and music turns out to be an intended effect.

The Black Dahlias said they wanted to be a modern mutation of a Depression-era hillbilly band. They don't want a cabin on a Tennessee hillside, a jug of moonshine and grits every darn day — they like their furnished apartments, Budweiser and fast food just fine.

But they would like to think their songs sound like the 78-speed records of the Carter Family, the Stanley Brothers and Hank Snow. My mother would play all these Carter Family records when I was a little girl, and I would hate them," Bailey said. "But as I got older, I started romanticizing the songs because I remembered some of the stories Mom told me about grandma in Oklahoma during the Depression Era.

"I started envisioning the Dust Bowl, 'mother's pregnant again' and one-room houses. I really fell in love with the songs."

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BILL ANDERSEN
guitarist for the Meat Purveyors

Tuesday Tales keeps old tradition alive

By PATRICK KELLY
Staff Writer

The tradition of storytelling has brought together people of different backgrounds and creeds. Thanks to area artists that tradition will be celebrated at Tuesday Tales, a weekly event and part of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Summer Events.

Storytellers from across the state bring anecdotes of various cultures to area families. Each week at 7 p.m. in July a different pair of storytellers will hold court on Architecture Hall's east steps.

The first of such nights will be on July 6 featuring two members of the UNL faculty. Matt "Sitting Bear" Jones, an instructor of Native American Studies. Jones will share traditional Native American tales. Jones will be joined by Ricardo Garcia, Associate Professor of psychology whose work is celebrated in the

Southwestern part of the United States.

Karen Libman, an associate professor of theatre and dance at UNL will regale the audience on July 13 alongside Jo Ann Ollerenshaw. Ollerenshaw was a featured artist at the Nebraska Storytellers Festival in Omaha. Omaha storytellers Rita Paskowitz and Peg Reinecke will share their work on July 27. The final evening will feature Western stories from the trio Cowboy Rhythm who hail from Ceresco and Albion.

Katherine Voorhees, director of Arts Are Basic/Outreach and a professor of fine and performing arts is enthusiastic about the university's involvement.

"The campus is here to serve the general public and now it will be a part of the joy of storytelling," Voorhees said.

Voorhees also stressed the importance of heading towards the Millennium with a firm sense of tradition.