

Swains wrangle date at West Seattle's Rocksport

By Lori Hinton
For The Sun

Was that a cowboy hat in the city? Hey, I thought I heard some twang. The sweet sound of pedal steel and the soul-wrenching songwriting of Seattle's own Swains are headed out west — to West Seattle that is.

Cross the water for a night of country you won't regret. On June 7, don your dancing boots, grab the Southworth ferry to Fauntleroy and hit up the Rocksport Bar & Grill for one of the hottest bands on the burgeoning country scene. Forget Shania; this is the real deal.

The Swains' story

Never heard of The Swains? A lot can be said in a name. First off, the word Swain has two meanings, one being a country lad (often times a young shepherd) and the second a young lover—only fitting for a country band that plays bleeding love-gone-wrong songs juxtaposed with tunes of redemption and hope.

"We play jubilantly about very sad things," says guitarist-extraordinaire Phillip Smith with a grin. "Sometimes you gotta get way down before you can see the sunshine."

Smith was introduced to founding members Danny Baker and Billy Burns by the band's former pedal steel player, Don Pawlak, who toured Europe and played the Grand Ole Opry with Smith.

"I was really impressed with Danny's songwriting and traditional purism in the honky-tonk genre," Smith says. "I started with them as a gun for hire, and eventually joined the band."

The Swains are Danny Baker (lead vocals and guitar), Billy Burns (bass player), Martin Leheldt (pedal steel), Barry Semple (drums) and Phillip Smith (lead guitar).

While the Swains are considered a Seattle band, each member represents a different state, or province, from Oklahoma and Alabama to North Carolina and Dawson Creek, British Columbia (yep, that's really the name of the place).



Courtesy photo

The Swains will bring their rockin' honky-tonk sound June 7 to The Rocksport in West Seattle. Visit www.swainscountry.com to learn more about the band.

Lead singer and songwriter Danny Baker hails from Wichita, Kan. Back home, Baker played in clubs, biker bars and out-of-the-way road houses. The singer and guitar player headed west in 1989.

"I sold the trailer, packed up the U-haul and the rest is history," he says.

Did I mention that these guys are the real deal?

And their fan T-shirts don't lie when they say The Swains are "Serious Honky Tonk!"

Baker says he tried the grunge thing during his first years in Seattle; he even played a little power pop. But he found his voice with The Swains. You have to hear the heart-twisting timbre for yourself.

In songs like "Blue are the Days" and "Senorita Weeps," Baker sings of bittersweet true-life stories and lost love.

"But he also turns around to sing about how he won't be lonely too long," Smith adds. "There's a real feeling of hope."

The Swains' sound

Influenced by artists such as Ray Price, Buck Owens, Patsy Cline, Buddy Holly, Merle Haggard and Dwight Yoakam, The Swains often play tribute to their heroes in addition to playing their original material.

In line with and respectful of their influences, The Swains keep country tradition while bringing fresh, thoughtful songwriting and raw musical talent to the stage. According to Smith, the fact that they don't seem anachronistic is because the band has its own sound, "which has everything to do with Danny's songwriting."

And what about The Swains' sound?

"It's a carefully corroborated mixture of twang and groove," Smith says.

Baker calls it "country-politan," but you also could get away with media buzzwords such as retro-traditionalist, old country, alt country or just plain country.

"We play everything from real rockin' country all the way over to honky tonk," Baker says.

The Swains' shows

"Our shows are not tightly scripted," Smith says. "The nature of our improvisational playing allows us to go wherever we want with the set."

But, he says, the audience is a huge part of where they're headed.

"We have a big space to fill with whatever the night brings," Smith says. "It's up to our audience to influence us. Like putting up a magnifying glass, what we dish out there comes back at us even bigger."

"I'm really excited about the band," he continues. "It could very well get to the point of critical mass, or the shampoo scenario where 'she told her friends, and they told their friends' until the feedback loop gets bigger and bigger."

To learn and hear more:

The Swains plan to record and self-release an EP in the next few months and have put the gears in motion for a possible West Coast tour this summer, so keep your eyes peeled and make sure to get on their mailing list at the_swains2000@yahoo.com or visit their Web site, www.swainscountry.com.

If you'd like to try some free country dance lessons before the show, stop by the Little Red Hen in Greenlake on Sunday nights. The Swains also play the Hen every Thursday night for those who want to preview the magic early.

— Lori Hinton

THE DETAILS

WHO: The Swains

WHERE: The Rocksport, 4209 SW Alaska, West Seattle

WHEN: June 7, 9 p.m.

INFO: (206) 935-5838

DRIVING DIRECTIONS:

From the Southworth terminal, take the ferry to Fauntleroy. Upon disembarking, turn left onto Fauntleroy Way. Follow Fauntleroy Way to California Avenue. Turn left on California to Alaska. Turn right on Alaska; the Rocksport will be on your right. Parking is available on the street and in the bar's back lot.

For bus information, see

<http://transit.metrokc.gov>

For ferry schedules, see www.wsdot.wa.gov/ferries/schedules/current/

The Swains' stir

The band has been strumming along for about a year now and is gaining momentum in Seattle's emerging alternative country scene, as well as its anti-country scene.

New fans often say, "I don't like country at all, but I love these guys."

This is how Smith says the band separates itself from glossy, pop-country bands:

"We're just dipping the bucket way down deep in the well to get to the good water."

When music moves you, it often can change mindsets about a genre. Wranglers can mingle with Levis, loving the same great music, no matter what the style.

Take a listen to The Swains and see what the buzz is all about.

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