

## **Bluegrass ... with a dose of sophistication**

By Laurie Heuston

Revels

Posted Jul 27, 2017 at 12:01 AM

Colorado band Ragged Union adheres to the tradition of old-time and bluegrass music but likes to play around with the genre and stretch it out some too, says singer, songwriter and frontman Geoff Union.

“We’re not strict traditionalists by any stretch,” he says during a telephone interview. “I see an ongoing evolution in our style and songwriting. Our first record, ‘Hard Row to Hoe,’ was simple with standard covers. Our newest, ‘Time Captain,’ shows more depth in our songwriting, and we’re working on new material. There are a lot of string bands in Colorado playing rock and pop music without the drums. We like the bluegrass sound and want to stay with that.

Ragged Union — husband and wife duo Geoff and Christina Union, mandolin champion Jordan Ramsey, banjo whiz Chris Elliot and upright bassist David Richey — perform at 9 p.m. Thursday, July 27, at Brickroom Gathering House, 35 N. Main St., Ashland. Admission is \$5.

Many talented bluegrass bands have emerged from Colorado, home of the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, RockyGrass Festival and Rocky Mountain Folks Festival, to name a few. Such notables include Vince Herman and Leftover Salmon, Blue Canyon Boys, Coral Creek, Crowhill Bluegrass Band, Highland Ramblers, Masontown and others.

“It’s a fertile bluegrass scene,” Union says. “I think bluegrass styles demand talented players.”

Union is self-taught. His wife sang in her school choir. Ramsey studied in the Oldtime and Country Music Program at East Tennessee State University in Knoxville with Jack Tottle (Lonesome River Boys, Tasty Licks with Bela Fleck) and Raymond McClain (Jim and Jesse McReynolds, The McLain Family Band).

Elliot studied music at South Plains Community College in Levelland, Texas, in a program founded by bluegrass musician and banjo player Alan Munde (Poor Richard’s Almanac, Sunny Mountain Boys, Flying Burrito Brothers, Country Gazette) and guitar player Joe Carr (Texas Lone Star Band). Richey is from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and also studied music at ETSU. His band Ruined Nation Boys was based in Colorado.

“David’s been with us for a couple of months now,” Union says. “One thing about Colorado, there’s a lot of bass players around but not many who know how to play bluegrass, how to put the right feel into it. David knows what it’s supposed to sound like, where to put the notes, make the feel of the music happen for the band. It’s all about rhythm and timing.”

Ragged Union’s sound on “Time Captain” showcases clean, skilled instrumentation in a tight style that is more sophisticated than traditional bluegrass.

“The music is respectful of the tradition, but what sets it apart is the songwriting,” Union says. “Our themes are not so much about love, loss, missing someone, being away from home or trying to get back home, those common elements.”

Union and his wife write songs with themes that go a bit beyond existential. Such as the title track to the new album, a song about the couple’s baby girl and what existence must be like for a 4-month old.

“It was a weird thought, and I tried to come up with some cool metaphors around it,” Union says. “I have another songwriting partner, Jim Harris, who is based in Portland. He send a lot of poetry and ideas my way. Some of them are super-far out. Great poetry but not suitable for songwriting. Now and then he sends me something I can put to a melody.

“I like lyrics that are somewhat grounded,” he laughs. “But I don’t write about those old, traditional themes because none of that stuff has ever happened to me. I write about things that are less universal.”