

A version of this story was reported by Peter Jones on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.

Woven Hand's punk-folk preaches to the converted



By Peter Jones

When he is clad in his overalls and a crumpled hat, the rail-thin David Eugene Edwards resembles a character from one of his neo-hillbilly songs — a disheveled backwoodsman, a dust-bowl refugee, or in his case, a working-class punk rocker reclaiming his Southern lineage.

Edwards, the leader of the band Woven Hand, may look like the picture of success in Hooterville, but setting Appalachian folk to a punk rock attitude did not exactly get audiences slam dancing — or even square dancing initially.

“They didn’t know what to think,” the singer-songwriter said of initial audience reactions. “There’s an intensity. Whether you like it or not, it’s going to affect you in some way. That usually is manifest by people just kind of standing wide-eyed and drop-jawed. We’re not a band that you would have play at a party,” he said.

Instead, Woven Hand will perform a rare acoustic show May 29 at Swallow Hill Music Association, 71 E. Yale Ave. in Denver.

Edwards’s story is cinematic tale of culture shock or a fish out of water. He picked up his interest in traditional mountain folk from his large Arkansan family, who had packed their bags for Colorado before the young’un was born in 1968.

The musician’s strongest childhood memories are of the treks he made through the small towns of the Rocky Mountains — arguably standing in for Appalachia — with his Southern-born grandfather, who was a traveling preacher in the classic mold.

“Church music is a heavy influence on me, personally, because I’ve been involved with it since I was a baby,” Edwards said.

Fascinated by the culture of the old South, the young musician used to scour the Denver Public Library learning everything he could about the Southern mountain life and music his family had left behind.

His love for the Carter Family was matched only by the teenager’s excitement for the punk rock he was hearing in his own social circles. Edwards was driven to organically meld the two interests, without regard to traditional purity or his own coolness factor.

To many, punk and Appalachian folk have about as much in common as Red Skelton and aluminum siding, but in the storied circles of Denver’s alternative music scene, Edwards managed to meet a few like-minded players who inexplicably shared his musical eclecticism.

The result was the Denver Gentlemen, a band that eventually spawned punk-country’s Slim Cessna’s Auto Club and Edwards’s band, 16 Horsepower. That trio fused Edwards’s two disparate passions into a unique soundscape that seemed retro and new at the same time.

The musician’s mix of Southern brimstone and alternative angst had barely developed a local following when 16 Horsepower caught the ear of the music industry in the mid-1990s. A representative for a small label passed a demo to Jeff Suey at A&M Records. He was so taken by the tape that he flew to Denver the following weekend.

“In the first few moments of the show, it was just one of the most amazing things I had ever seen,” Suey said. “It was this man sitting on a stool channeling spirits through this bandonian that he plays. It was just really impressive and I knew before the first song was over, that if I were fortunate, I’d be able to sign this band and work with them.”

The accordion-like bandonian Edwards plays was made in Germany in the late 1800s. When he found the instrument in a pawn shop, the musician says “something” told him that he was destined to have it. He views the bandonian and the other vintage instruments he has collected over the years as sort of ghosts that connect him to a musical past.

“It’s like it’s alive in some way or something,” Edwards said of his trademark bandonian. “It’s been played on for so long and used to express people’s feelings. I wouldn’t say [my instruments] are haunted, but that’s the feeling that I get from them.”

Edwards’s obsession with the past, his mordant chords, and lyrics full of sin, death and redemption have led some critics to call his music dark, gloomy or morbid — an interpretation that the songwriter claims not to understand.

“I just think [my music] lends itself to truth, and if the truth is gloomy to you, then it’s gloomy,” he said. “The [16 Horsepower] song ‘Heel and the Shovel,’ where I’m singing, ‘I’m digging you a shallow grave,’ people hear that and think, ‘Boy, that’s really an angst-ridden song and it’s really dark.’ For me, that song is totally a joyful song. It’s about finally being able to get rid of something in my life, something about me

that is bad.”

Despite a promising ignition, 16 Horsepower ran out of gas in 2005. Edwards has since devoted his full-time energies to Woven Hand, whose latest CD *Ten Stones* was released last year.

Treble magazine describes Woven Hand as "... like Nick Cave and Johnny Cash in a shoot-out in Deadwood ..."

For Edwards, 41, his most important review over the years came from his grandfather, the onetime fundamentalist preacher who years earlier scolded him on the evils of rock and roll.

“He watched our video and he said I was a good boy,” Edwards said.

Woven hand plays May 29 at 8 p.m. at Swallow Hill Music Association, 71 E. Yale Ave. in Denver. Advance tickets are \$14 or \$12 for Swallow Hill members. For information, call 303-777-1003 or visit swallowhillmusic.org.