

Bluegrass buddies to bring Foggy Hogtown Boys to Cultural Centre

By Brock Weir

As banjo player Chris Coole wrapped up a lesson to prepare for his regular weekly performance with his friends at Toronto's Silver Dollar Room, he was anticipating a show with not a whole lot of patter to entertain the crowds as they partied, drank, and talked between songs.



Chris Coole at the guitar. (Photo by Geoff George)

Every performance, and every venue requires its own gear shift and Aurora is no exception. Mr. Coole and his bluegrass buddies in the famed Foggy Hogtown Boys bring their own energetic sound to the Aurora Cultural Centre on April 19.

The group, comprising of Andrew Collins on mandolin, Coole on guitar, and claw-hammer banjo, Max Heineman on acoustic bass, Chris Quinn on bluegrass banjo and rhythm guitar, and John Showman on fiddle ? all sharing vocal duties ? came together in 2001 when, unlike, today, there was a veritable drought in what they had to offer.

?There was a very limited pool of musicians who were living in Toronto and doing that, so there were maybe about a dozen guys in town who were doing bluegrass,? said Mr. Coole. ?We all knew each other and we all played in a lot of different bands together and eventually I got a gig at a little bar.?

Regular players began to gather around the regular gig, and it grew to an actual band.

?It wasn't necessarily supposed to be a project that just went on and on, but we have now toured all over the place into Israel and Ireland and all through the States, but it just started as a flow-together band for a weekly gig.?

Although the Silver Dollar might not have been the right venue to give them a chance to talk about their backgrounds in between songs, the Foggy Hogtown Boys are certainly the people to bring a decent amount of expertise to what they perform. Mr. Coole, for

instance, knew when he was a teenager he had a certain passion for folk music. It doesn't seem like the most logical choice, however. Country music was not something in the regular atmosphere of the home, but musicians such as Gordon Lightfoot and Neil Young captured his teenage imagination.

?When I was a teen, I liked the fact the banjo was something a little bit different. A lot of the kids were looking for ways to stand out and that definitely was that. Some kid who is wanting to learn how to play and maybe get into a band, they might be competing against 10 different guitar players, but they would be the only ones who are able to play the banjo.?

With his new passion, he took it up in earnest. His first performances on the banjos were in the Toronto subways and busking. Eventually through doing that, he met some likeminded musicians, formed various bands, and played odd gigs around the city.

?Now there are lots of younger bands around town playing, but just playing in bars and on the streets in Toronto, on the subways busking, and then becoming more established and getting out and playing more major folk festivals around Canada and the United States was the way forward.?

As the popularity of the Foggy Hogtown Boys has grown, so too has the popularity of the humble banjo. They are more popular right now than they have been since the 1960s, says Mr. Coole, and a lot of this can be contributed to what he describes as ?brushes with popular culture? such as the band Mumford and Sons or the film O Brother Where Art Thou. There is always a base audience for this type of music, he adds, and when it ?gets a nod from pop culture? it reaches millions.

?I am obviously biased and I think when most people hear this type of music, it is rare to find somebody who listens to bluegrass and traditional music in general and just says, ?Oh, that's terrible! I hate the sound of it.' Most people at least find it somewhat joyful and happy sounding but it is not on their radar. ?It is wonderful music and the thing I have gotten the most out of it is it is a social type of music.

?You can do that anywhere. You can go out into a park, have a jam session with acoustic instruments. You can take them camping with you and you can take them outside and create music organically anytime and anywhere you want. For me, some of the friendships that have grown out of that are very important to my life.?

The Foggy Hogtown Boys perform at the Aurora Cultural Centre on Friday, April 19 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$25 per person and are available by calling 905-713-1818.