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A pirate's life

The Dread Crew of Oddwood aren't just play-acting

By Sammi Skolmoski



There are pirates among us.

As legend has it, they are men whose faces have been wholly consumed by beards. Their garb is taken from the pages of Treasure Island and their blood-alcohol levels rival the volume of the sea.

Armed with toy pianos and tin whistles, The Dread Crew of Oddwood—five young lads from San Diego and one from Seattle—invoke the maniacal magnificence of their piratical ancestors, translating it into a raucous explosion of “about 20-

percent music and 80percent antics,” as Dread bassist Smithy Crow recently put it in an email from the bowels of their tour ship— er, van—as they plied the highways on their second national tour.

With a love of video-game soundtracks and heavy metal, The Dread Crew play traditional Celtic music with a modern twist. But they're not play-acting like the Jack Sparrows at Disneyland.

“We don't have to get that into our characters, because our 'characters' are just us,” says Wolfbeard O'Brady, who pumps the accordion and toots the tin whistle. “Us, with no inhibitions. So, really, we're more like pirates than the people who act like pirates, because pirates weren't 'acting' like anything.”

Nathaniel Grizzlejaw, the group's Anglo concertina player, adds: “The reason the whole pirate thing got started is because Wolfbeard has been dressing like that since he was 12.”

In the three years they've been playing together, Crow, Grizzlejaw, O'Brady and the rest of the Dread crewmen—Riven Rahl (toy piano), Ruba Jouba (mandolin, guitar) and Castle (percussion), all in their early 20s—have plundered pubs, rock venues and Renaissance faires across the land. Their most recent album, 2010's Rocktopus, is a stirring saga that begs to soundtrack your most debauched nights. But their infectious spirit is best to behold in the flesh—with a pint of ale in hand.

“We find that we tend to perform at our best when the audience is really into it,” Rahl says.

“For example, one time I chopped a mandolin apart with an axe instead of playing it,” Jouba adds.

“Honestly,” Grizzlejaw interjects, “you'd be amazed with what you can get away with dressed like a pirate.”

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Above all, though, they are folk singers—masters of sonic storytelling, they weave epic tales of mayhem, folklore and fantasy into each song. Listening to their music is like getting caught up in a really great story.

"For me, story has always been my primary passion," Rahl says. "I always used to write little novels that never got anywhere."

Their telling of the crew's inception is especially colorful. The bio on their website is an enthralling legend of transcontinental debauchery rife with concubines, booze, magic, death and sea beasts.

The real story, however, is that O'Brady rented out a room in the San Diego Convention Center to hold a gathering for fellow members of a fan message board for the Sega Genesis series Ecco the Dolphin. Oddwood's original nine members were the only ones who showed up.

Today, the Dread Crew find a consistently appreciative fan base at Renaissance faires. O'Brady, as it happens, is a seasoned Renaissance man.

"There's just something about the way that hundreds or even thousands of people can promote an idea as ridiculous as living in a 15th-century village in England," he says.

"Alcohol helps," he continues. "But it's fun to get lost in this crazy fantasy world that people live in."

Video games aside, they try not to rely too heavily on the conveniences of modernity. "We've had a constant struggle between using analog and digital everything," Castle says. "Including GPS vs. analog maps. I'm a big proponent of analog maps."

"He wanted to buy, like, 33 Thomas Brothers maps," Grizzlejaw says.

"A good rule of thumb is: If it's manly and archaic, it's OK," O'Brady explains.

Indeed, they've done their best to stay true to the pirate's life on tour, but there are always practical considerations.

"We wanted to paint [our van] and upgrade it with stuff like wings and a new mast, but we decided to be more low-key for this journey," Crow says.

"In case we need to sell it," Grizzlejaw adds.

The Dread Crew of Oddwood play with S.C.I.R.I.N. at Tin Can Ale House on Sunday, July 31.
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