

Austin group hits its stride with strong new CD

By Ron Wynn, rwynn@nashvillecitypaper.com

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Austin's Two High String Band's roots date back 11 years, when mandolinist Billy Bright and fingerstyle guitarist Brian Smith began playing together in a quartet. Bright and Smith have kept various configurations of the group going ever since, sometimes operating as a quartet and other times maintaining a three-piece format. The band even survived a lengthy period where Bright was principally working with Peter Rowan and only played occasional dates. Their new CD *Moonshine Boogie* (Blue Corn) marks Bright's renewed focus on Two High String Band. The core trio that also includes flatpick style guitarist Geoff Union will be performing selections from the new disc tonight at the Station Inn.

What: Austin's Two High String Band

When: 9 tonight

Where: The Station Inn, 402 12th Ave. S.

Cost: \$8

Info: 255-3307

"I really enjoyed playing with Peter's band," Bright said. "But at a certain point, you're playing someone else's music, and I continued writing a lot of songs, but didn't really have the right vehicle for hearing how they sound until we got the band going again. Right now I'm not doing any more sideman work, just concentrating on the Two High String Band."

Given that Bright is clearly among the finest mandolin and mandola players in bluegrass, folk, Americana or even jam band circles (his past associations have included Tony Rice, Vassar Clements, Norman Blake, and Don Edwards as well as Rowan), that decision is a major one.

In addition, *Moonshine Boogie*, their third Blue Corn CD, is also their most conceptually challenging work. Part of that comes from the frenzied collaborations between the main players and special guests banjo ace Tony Trischka, bassist Eric Thorin and fiddler Wayne "Chojo" Jacques, who now also travels extensively with Two High String Band (though he's not appearing at tonight's concert). Fueled by some amazingly fast banjo work from Trischka, the jazz-influenced bass work of Thorin and Jacques' inspired fiddling, Bright, Smith and Union in turn sound even more animated and intense on several numbers, from the stomping fervor of the title track and "Crossing The Devil's Backbone" to "Cold World," "Hammerin' On" and "The Closer," the final piece written by Smith.

Easily blending aspects of bluegrass, folk, jazz, and blues, the Two High String Band has a sound that's sometimes quite innovative and other times very traditional. The new disc also represents a fine mixture of technology and spontaneity.

"We kind of had to record this in a bunch of places and work around a lot of different schedules," Bright recalled. "We got Tony's parts down in one place, Eric's another and then did Chojo when we could. But we wanted things to still seem more spontaneous, so we never did more than three takes of any song. I guess it's kind of the best aspects of modern recording technology and old-fashioned jamming."