

One Ton Pig fine-tunes Americana set list

Band mixes classic rock, bluegrass, Latin vibe.



Michael Batdorf, left, and Justin Smith practice with fellow One Ton Pig members (not shown) Andy Calder and Jason Baggett. The band plays Tuesdays at the Silver Dollar Bar. NEWS&GUIDE PHOTO / STEVE REMICH

*Katy Niner
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With fewer gigs and more time during the offseason, Jackson bands continue to practice. This Stepping Out series goes behind the scenes to capture valley musicians honing their craft.

Prepared for the fun of reliving teenage shenanigans, bassist Andy Calder didn't expect to have a musical reckoning during his 20th high school reunion in Flint, Mich.

Calder, the bass player for One Ton Pig, narrated his reunion story while his band mates – Justin Smith on guitar and lead vocals, Michael Batdorf, guitar and vocals, and drummer Jason Baggett – futzed with their instruments during a practice last week.

Calder's mid-practice anecdote: Cruising from the airport along I-75 in a rental ride, Calder turned on the radio station that he grew up listening to and immediately recognized the voice introducing Led Zeppelin.

"It was the same record, the same time slot," Calder said. Back in Jackson, he sent the DJ an e-mail: "Glad you don't change, Arthur."

Calder seemed stunned by the juxtaposition of his musical trajectory compared with the DJ in Flint: The Zeppelin record on repeat was a dramatic foil for the musical variety of One Ton Pig.

Practice began with Smith proposing to cull their Americana repertoire to a tight list of 30 songs.

But before the set-list inquisition, they added new tunes ahead of their Halloween gig at the Silver Dollar Bar, starting with "Where Did You Sleep Last Night," aka "In the Pines," a haunting folk song originally made popular by Lead Belly and Bill Monroe, and again, more recently, by Nirvana's plodding cover of it. A line referring to a decapitated head "found in the driver's wheel" made it fitting for Halloween, Smith said, when he played the Nirvana version for the band from iTunes.

"But we're a bluegrass band!" Calder feigned protest.

The cover art for MTV Unplugged in New York came up on Smith's desktop screen: a stage cluttered with fans and flamingo pink lights.

"See," Smith said "that's what I want our stage to look like."

"They're too loud even before they played a note," Calder quipped.

They run through it once, but without Baggett (he set up his drum set slowly because he had pulled his back moving the day before), so they play it again with percussions and Batdorf sang.

The Halloween theme continued with "Spooky" by the Classics IV. They jump in, playing over the recording. Smith worked his voice into the grooves of the rolling rhythms.

As a cold drizzle fell outside, Smith's practice room in his Wilson home steeped in music and its accoutrements. Two acoustic guitars hung in a corner, and artwork of a musical theme, including a photograph of the Imagine mosaic in Central Park, covered one wall. Back issues of Guitar Player filled a bookshelf, and sheets of Christmas music rested on a keyboard. Smith asked Baggett to flick on the standing light beside him, a chameleon orb that changed from blue to green to purple. Calder questioned its utility.

"Mood is where the magic happens," Smith said.

The mood became democratic when they began reviewing their master set list, kept on Smith's computer. He went down the list: Calder voted to nix "Bayou Voodoo," but Batdorf spoke up in its favor. "It's a giddy-up song," he said. "People get up and move for it."

Calder set a baseline for the band's democracy. "I vote no on the song, but I vote yes on keeping the gig."

The voting continued, with all four players voicing opinions. They tried to balance slow tracks with fast, straight-up bluegrass with classic rock, Jackson favorites with the band's best. "Could we not play any jail songs for awhile?" Batdorf requested. They deemed some good but overplayed ("Wagon Wheel"), others were dismissed as ho-hum ("Blue Car"). Honesty reigned. "I think I understand where it's going," Calder said of "Leavin' Mother's Bones," "but I don't always feel like we get there as a band."

To explore this statement, Smith dug up the song's charts, and he and Batdorf traded seats and instruments so that Batdorf could take the lead on reworking it (they both play acoustic and electric guitars).

Calder asked Batdorf what he wanted musically and offered a Latin undertone, which Baggett accentuated. They discussed what they were doing as they played. The Latin vibe saved the song list from the set-list cemetery.

The rehearsal ended with "Dead Flowers" – quintessentially One Ton Pig, according to Calder. "When people ask me what One Ton Pig sounds like, I say 'Dead Flowers,'" he said.

Just as Zeppelin evoked adolescence for Calder, bluegrassified rock is classic One Ton Pig.