

Pushing boundaries

Toronto's award-winning Creaking Tree String Quartet -- a mix of jazz, roots, bluegrass and chamber music -- comes to London.

By James Reaney

London Free Press

December 6, 2007

Fresh from winning two categories at the Canadian Folk Music Awards, Toronto's Creaking Tree String Quartet blows into Aeolian Hall tomorrow night.

Appropriately, the band claimed its second "pushing the boundaries" award in the first three years the awards have been handed out. Creaking Tree mandolin player Andrew Collins won it with a solo CD -- one including the quartet's guitarist Brad Keller, bassist Brian Kobayakawa and violinist John Showman -- in 2006. Creaking Tree also won in 2005.

"We've got a stranglehold on that one -- or something," says Kobayakawa. "So far, it's our award," adds Showman.

Creaking Tree blends jazz, roots, bluegrass and chamber music and more in a combination one Toronto music industry friend has dubbed "chambergrass."

The quartet also took home the 2007 folk awards prize for best instrumentalist group. "It's (exciting) to be acknowledged by our peers and to get some recognition for the hard work that we do," says Kobayakawa.

Tomorrow's 8 p.m. concert is the London CD launch for *The Soundtrack*, Creaking Tree's third CD.

Creaking Tree brought in Grammy-winning producer, Bill VornDick who also engineered the session. "It's a partnership that works," raves *Exclaim* music magazine critic Kerry Doole. "The album title is apt and, along with such evocative song titles as *Spacehead* (a nine-minute epic) and *Lithograph Lizard*, it encourages the listener to create complementary short films in their imagination. Lovely stuff."

Creaking Tree had to cancel their trip to last weekend's folk awards. But they had already been at its venue, Gatineau, Que.'s, Museum of Civilization, this fall. The string ensemble was commissioned to write and perform a short piece drawing inspiration from the Glenn Gould-produced radio work, *Idea of North*. Creaking Tree's performance was recorded by CBC Radio at the museum on Sept. 28. It was tied to the Glenn Gould Society's "year of Glenn Gould," in the year Gould would have turned 75.

Gould, who often reflected on the importance of the North in his writings and radio work, died in 1982.

Gould's North is one boundary for Creaking Tree to push. Another is bluegrass. Showman is a classically-trained violinist who stopped playing at 19 and then found his way back into music via bluegrass. He and Collins are often heard as part of a Toronto bluegrass outfit.

When Creaking Tree nears its fastest, it keeps pace with bluegrass. "One hundred and seventy beats per minute is pretty normal" in bluegrass, Showman says. "I feel comfortable improvising in a bluegrass context at that speed."

The 170 bpm -- "or half-notes" -- is the estimate Kobayakawa provides for Creaking Tree when its players are approaching overdrive.

All four members of the quartet compose and they certainly have created lovely and lyrical compositions to play. Some are in unusual and challenging time-signatures and rhythms which the four string players handle like masters.

Still, the impression is that Creaking Tree is happiest when the music is flying. "It gets the blood flowing," Showman says of the way the quartet will drop a fast number into the mix.

The band also has another boundary to push. A new project, Plugged, will have the acoustic band playing electric sounds. The four may bring in a drummer -- or "percussion-slash-drums" on board -- for Plugged, Showman says.

Tomorrow's concert is Creaking Tree's third visit to London in recent months. The quartet starred in July at the 2007 Home County Folk Festival and were also here for October's Ontario's Council of Folk Festivals annual conference.

Joining the quartet as a double-winner at the folk awards was Toronto fiddler Anne Lindsay. London-region nominees were Sirens, in a category won by Tanglefoot, and St. Marys-area singer-songwriter Emm Gryner who was nominated in the best songwriter (English) category won by Oh Susanna.

IF YOU GO . . .

What: CD launch by Toronto roots instrumental "chambergrass" ensemble the Creaking Tree String Quartet.

When: Tomorrow, 8 p.m.

Where: Aeolian Hall, 795 Dundas St. (at Rectory)

Tickets: \$25 advance, \$30 at the door. Call 519-672-7950 or check aeolianhall.ca