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Houston Jones Finds its Roots

By Andrew Gilbert

Somewhere there's a crossroads where country and rock, gospel and bluegrass, blues and pop music all converge, and loitering around that dusty intersection you'll find Houston Jones. The high-energy Americana band has been developing its quirky, mostly acoustic sonic mélange in folk and rock clubs around the Bay Area over the past two years.

Founded as a duo in the fall of 2001 by veteran vocalist Travis Jones and Glenn "Houston" Pomianek, a mild-mannered Oracle employee by day and a wicked left-handed guitar slinger by night, the band has evolved into a potent quartet featuring bassist Robert "Woody" Trevorror and drummer Peter Tucker. With influences that range across the American musical landscape, from the Celtic strains of Appalachia to the greasy soul of Mussel Shoals, the group has developed a repertoire that includes originals and covers of Hank Williams ("Long Gone Lonesome Blues"), Robert Johnson ("Crossroads"), Vince Gill ("Whenever You Come Around Here") and Nanci Griffith ("Love at the Five and Dime").

"Nailing down our genre is like herding cats," says Pomianek. "We're all over the map. We kind of bill ourselves as Americana, but that's fast and loose. We do everything from electric blues to bluegrass, some acoustic Irish type of stuff to folk, country, rock and gospel."

Part of what makes the group so effective is that it seamlessly blends instrumental prowess with tasty vocal harmonies, occasionally dropping a dramatically rendered four-part a cappella gospel number in the middle of a set. The band has courted its devoted following with a steady flow of performances, including a twice-monthly gig at its Hayward home base, the Bistro.

Houston Jones also makes regular appearances on a circuit that includes Henfling's, Starry Plough and Freight & Salvage, where the group recorded a raucous performance last summer featuring the Waybacks' mandolin and fiddle master Wayne "Chojo" Jacques as special guest. His presence explains the tongue-twister title of the new Houston Jones album "Hojo Mojo with Chojo" (Fiddling Cricket/Summerhill), and he'll be on hand on Wednesday when the band celebrates the album's release at Espresso Garden & Café as part of the Fiddling Cricket concert series.

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Changing bands

Pomianek was a founding member of the Waybacks in 1999, but dropped out after a few months to pursue a different musical direction. It was only the latest of a half-dozen bands he and Jacques have been in together, and Pomianek's decision to go his own way has clearly not dampened their musical chemistry.

“I like to take chances but Chojo makes me feel like a conservative in a pinstripe suit,” Pomianek says. “We've been playing off of each other since 1982, and we know who's going to play when, but I still have no idea what he's going to do. Some of the wildness he brings to the Waybacks shows up on our CD.”

A Bay Area music fan with a long memory could spend all day playing Six Degrees of Houston Jones, as the band is linked to a huge swath of the region's music history. Tucker first made his mark here in the late '60s with Pacific Gas & Electric and the Beau Brummels, though as a busy session musician he's played and recorded with folk, jazz, country, blues and rock combos, including Large and in the Way, which also featured Pomianek and Jones. Trevororrow and Pomianek were part of the country rock band Hearts on Fire, a group that won a Bammie back in the day when it was a fairly prestigious award.

Clubs abounded

It was a time when the Bay Area boasted scores of little clubs where bands could hone their sound and develop a following, in stark contrast to today's venue-poor music scene. It's not surprising that Houston Jones came together at one of the region's most important roots rock spots.

Since the mid-'90s, the Bistro has served as a vital proving ground for Bay Area bands, most famously the Grammy-winning group Train, which honed its Southern rock sensibility at the club several years ago. With no cover and a capacity of 75, live music every night and a well-stocked espresso and micro-brew bar, the venue blends the amenities of an upscale cafe with the stage-centric design of a well-conceived nightclub.

“We have musicians in every night, and every once in a while you can tell they've got something special,” says Vic Kralj, who owns and runs the Bistro with his wife, Cynthia. “With Houston Jones, there was this powerful feeling coming out of them. The clarity with which they play together makes the music so vivid. We just watched the audience response grow.”

Houston Jones

Where: Espresso Garden & Café, 814 S. Bascom Ave., San Jose

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

Tickets: \$15; (408) 294-3353

Also: 9 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Aug. 21; the Bistro, 1001 B St., Hayward; no cover; (510) 886-8525