Cal Poly Arts Brings "The Mammals" to Spanos Theatre

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Folk Rock Group 'The Mammals' in Concert at Spanos Theatre March 8

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- According to the Boston Globe, “The Mammals redraw the boundaries of old-time music with breathtaking musicianship and a delicious sense of mischief.”

Cal Poly Arts presents The Mammals -- string players with a rock and roll heart – on Wednesday, March 8, 2006 at 8 p.m. in the Spanos Theatre.

The group features guitarist/banjoist/singer Tao Rodriguez-Seeger (grandson of Pete Seeger), guitarist/banjoist Michael Merenda, bassist Jacob Silver, drummer Chris Merenda, and vocalist Ruth Ungar, who is the daughter of Grammy-winning fiddler Jay Ungar.

The folk-rock quintet has evolved since their formation in the spring of 2001, picking up new sounds and styles along the way. Today, they deliver the combined power of Appalachian fiddle-banjo alchemy, their own contemporary lyric poetry, and a dynamic rock-n-roll rhythm section.

“It's the band I've wanted to be in since I was seventeen!” crows Tao Rodriguez-Seeger, who grew up as fascinated by the group AC/DC as he was by his famous banjo-picking grandfather.

“Music is music,” adds Michael Merenda, who shares the banjo/guitar duties and is the group's primary songwriter. “People think that The Mammals have pushed and broadened the boundaries of folk music. I think we've barely even started. There are no boundaries. There are conventions.”

It's that pioneering attitude that has characterized the band from the beginning and continues to attract new audiences today. Their first CD, “Born Live,” was a rough-hewn collection of their early live concert recordings and gives the impression of a self-made boot-leg.

Teaming up months later with their highly-regarded producer/engineer, Max Feldman, The Mammals entered the home-recording studio and created a more polished but equally energetic gem, “Evolver.”

That was the CD that would eventually catch the ear of Jim Olsen at the Signature Sounds label. In January 2004, The Mammals released another live concert sampler called “Migration” and in April, wowed fans with their most evolved studio recording to date, “Rock That Babe.”

Based in Woodstock, NY, their journeys across the continent have been the source of great inspiration. Their latest CD, “Departure,” reflects the themes of home and travel that have permeated their days and nights together.

It’s a work that shows the band moving towards a completely unique sound. The rocking energy of fiddles and banjos has been augmented with electric guitar, keyboards and a heavy rhythm section.

Unlike their live shows and past Mammals albums, there is no traditional music on “Departure.” While one can still catch the band’s folky roots showing through in parts, the new album features noticeably more rock moments.

“‘Departure’ could easily get put in the rock section of a record store, yet the instrumentation of the band hasn’t changed much,” says Rodriguez-Seeger. “We added some organ sounds and a few electric guitar overdubs, but for the most part, it’s fiddle, banjo, guitar, upright bass, drums and lots of singing. I’m most happy with the way it just sounds like a damn good band at the peak of their creative process.”

Tickets for the performance are $28 & $34, with student discounts available, and may be purchased at the Performing Arts Ticket Office, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays. To order by phone, call

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