

TULSA WORLD HOMEPAGE | Sunday, March 21, 2010 |

## TULSA BLUEGRASS BAND HITS ITS STRIDE

Rockin' Acoustic Circus makes up for lack of age with abundant talent.



The Rockin' Acoustic Circus takes another step with a new CD, set for release at the Jazz Depot next month. KELLY KERR/Courtesy

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Published: 3/21/2010 2:20 AM  
Last Modified: 3/21/2010 6:00 AM

Keep in mind, they range in age from 15 to 17 years. But to the average listener, the members of the Rockin' Acoustic Circus could be bluegrass musicians in their prime.

The circus disagrees.

"They're still getting comfortable with their instruments," said Rick Morton, as the others agree. He is the one member of the Tulsa-area band who can get away with such a statement. As the lone adult member, Morton has been a musician for longer than the others have existed — the "others" being Sterling Abernathy, 16; Carson Clemishire, 16; Eric Dysart, 17; and Emma Hardin, 17; and Zac Hardin, 15.

When it gets down to it, what these teens lack in experience, they make up in a cool, fixed determination to make Rockin' Acoustic Circus a success.

On the edge of releasing a new album, "Lonestar Lullabye," the Circus comes closer to "main attraction" status with every live show and rehearsal. A "strong tune" by their close friend and songwriter, the late Ronnie Wiggins, "Lonestar Lullabye" catches this fairly new, very young musical group at an intriguing point in time.

What began about two years ago with Sterling and two other kids wanting to enter a band contest on a whim has grown into touring throughout the year to various folk and bluegrass festivals most weekends with much more heavy travel throughout the summer months.

The CD release show is set for 7 p.m. Saturday, April 3, at the Jazz Depot.

Last month, they were a showcase act at the International Folk Alliance Conference in Memphis, Tenn., and Wintergrass 2010 in Bellevue, Wash.

"They're at the place where they're still learning their instruments, but they're expected to play a professional show," Morton said. "You have to show up and be that, and you have to be confident on your instrument — work on your

presentation. "But then on the side, you're still working to get better. There's no way you can get that with two hours of practice after school."

RAC rehearsals take place three times each week, where they kick around boxes of Goldfish crackers between them with mismatched-sock-clad feet. They're all home-schooled now, which makes it easier for them to get in the valuable rehearsal time to perfect numbers like "Shillelagh," a Celtic-flecked tune written by local musician Shelby Eicher. It's pronounced "sha-lay-leigh," but only Emma can spell it.

She sets up her cello as they prepare. That's right — a classical cello in a bluegrass band.

In the circle, Sterling studies his mandolin. To his left, Eric positions his fiddle. Zac sets up the bass. Morton settles the guitar onto his lap. Carson checks the fret board on his banjo. What comes next any music lover can appreciate.

It would be wrong to call Rockin' Acoustic Circus another bluegrass band.

The Hardin sibs add classical polish to Carson's country pluck. Throw in a bit of Sterling's Old World mandolin and Eric's melancholy fiddle with Morton's rhythmic steadiness, and you find a sound blended of jazz, country, folk and other genres to be traditional bluegrass. They prefer to think of it as progressive.

"We want our original thing," Morton said. "I love bluegrass, and it's a huge part of our show, but it's not all there is. We're going to use that and play. But as you sit and listen you're going to hear a lot of our stuff."

What you'll hear is music written by local artists along with more traditional pieces. Emma and Eric lead the vocals, but everyone joins in on harmonies.

"I think the term bluegrass is expanding, too," Emma said. "There's a lot of music out there, and they (musicians) are playing it at bluegrass festivals but it's not really what people think of (as straight bluegrass)."

While most teens are listening to mainstream pop, R&B, hip-hop and alternative, the Rockin' Acoustic Circus is creating their own mark with music influenced by Ricky Skaggs, Alison Krauss and similar artists. Still, there's something unique to the band's approach.

"I think our CD coming out will definitely define who we are," Eric said. "We have a few bluegrass songs, but it's mostly original. That's just what we do."

One of those originals, "Filly and a Pack of Mules," from their second CD, "Tribute," was written for the band by Wiggins noting a sense of solidarity among them.

"They're the only friends they've got time for," says manager, Karen Abernathy. It isn't always so easy.

"They're gaining respect for each other," Morton said. "We've been together two or three years, so we have our moments, and we've learned how to deal with each other and respect each other."

As mentor, Morton has taken the lead on choosing arrangements and working out ways to highlight each musician's individuality. Now, he said, the teens are figuring it out for themselves and taking more creative risks.

"You have to realize that Rick was our teacher," said Sterling. "He taught us everything that we know as a band. For a long time, he's the one that wrote the arrangements and wrote the solos. What he's been trying to do for the past six months is get us to do that by ourselves."

"They want more," Morton said. "They've got their instrument(s) and schedule, and they — as they were learning and coming up — they wanted more. "It wasn't me or Karen who said, 'Well, let's do "X" amount' They had to make the decision."

## **CD release**

**Rockin' Acoustic Circus** Doors open at 7 p.m. Saturday, April 3, at the Jazz Depot, 111 E. First St. Show begins at 7:30 p.m.

**Note:** The CD is available for purchase along with the band's first two albums on the Rockin' Acoustic Circus' Web site. For purchases, band news and a list of upcoming shows, go to [tulsaworld.com/RAC](http://tulsaworld.com/RAC).

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