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From left, Sterling Abernathy, Carson Clemishire, Emma Hardin, Eric Dysart, Rick Morton and Zac Hardin.



A DAY AT THE CIRCUS

BY JOY JENKINS

IF ALL YOU HEARD was their music, you'd have a hard time believing that most of the members of Rockin' Acoustic Circus aren't even old enough for a driver's license. ¶ As the band rehearsed recently at the Jazz Hall of Fame, fiddler **Eric Dysart** sang lead vocals on "Ghost in this House," his soft, soulful voice bringing new emotion to the classic country tune. The group then effortlessly switched to a rollicking, bluegrass-tinged version of "Last Train to Clarksville." ¶ Each of the band members is obviously gifted. Mandolin player **Sterling Abernathy**, 14, has been taking private lessons for five years and composes his own music. Dysart, 15, has been playing for 10 years, amassing three Oklahoma Junior State Fiddle Championships and finishing in the top 10 at the Nashville National Grand Masters Fiddle Championship. Banjo player **Carson Clemishire**, 14, decided to try the instrument after hearing the "Beverly Hillbillies" theme song and, two years later, seems like an old pro. Siblings **Zac**, 13, and **Emma Hardin**, 15, who play upright bass and cello, respectively, are members of the Tulsa Youth Symphony and attend the prestigious Barthlemes

Conservatory of Music. ¶ They got together through **Rick Morton**, their private lessons instructor, who once played with **Ronnie Dunn** and the best-selling country act The Tractors. Now, he is the "ringmaster" of the Circus and enjoys imparting his musical expertise to the young musicians. ¶ "Playing instruments individually, they're all just eager, talented, great little players," he says. "As a group, when you first get that combination of players together, it takes a while to respect everyone's part, (but) they figured it out and now they're really putting that together, what it means to play as an ensemble. It's really fun to watch them." ¶ In just a year, the group has already performed at a variety of regional festivals and released an album, "Stay Tuned." This month, they will release their second album and open for **Sam Bush** – considered an originator of the "newgrass" style – July 10 at the Blank Slate. ¶ Morton says concert attendees can expect to hear all of the Circus' original material, "some hard-driving bluegrass," he says, along with other musical genres – jazz, blues, rock. He says he appreciates that the band members are learning to infuse music with their own styles. ¶ Likewise, Emma Hardin says she appreciates that the Circus is introducing an entirely new generation to bluegrass. ¶ "I like that we're bringing it back and putting a new spin on it," she says. ■

For more information, visit www.rockinacousticcircus.com.