

Bringing 'magical' moment to stage



Switchback, featuring Marty McCormack (left) and Brian FitzGerald, bring their blend of American roots music and Celtic soul to the Acorn Theater on Saturday. Photo provided

Americana/Celtic band Switchback to play Acorn Theater on Saturday

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO - H-P Features Writer**

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THREE OAKS - Marty McCormack and Brian FitzGerald have collected a lot of memories in the 18 years since forming their Americana/Celtic band Switchback, but none of them stand out more than a 1996 concert in Lansing, Iowa, on the shores of the Mississippi River.

"We were opening for (late banjo virtuoso and singer/songwriter) John Hartford, and there was some question whether the concert could go on because the mayflies had just hatched on the river," McCormack says by telephone from Chicago. "Luckily they put these mercury lights up at the concert and they all kind of flocked up there, floating above us like these ghosts from another world. It was just a magical evening."

So magical, in fact, that more than a decade later the duo wrote a song about that night, "The Mayfly Dance," to be the centerpiece for their latest album, "Ghosts of the River Folk," which was released last year.

"The album is really a tribute to the people of the upper Mississippi Valley," says McCormack, who along with FitzGerald, returns to Three Oaks on Saturday to perform at The Acorn Theater. "For years we've been playing out in that area and collected a lot of experiences."

"Ghosts of the River Folk" leans heavily to the Americana side of Switchback's repertoire, but Saturday's concert, McCormack says, will certainly feature the Celtic traditions that brought the two musicians together.

FitzGerald was a mandolin student of Kenneth "Jethro" Burns and had already toured with "The King of Zydeco"

Clifton Chenier when he met McCormack in 1986. McCormack was a voice student of Whelma Oshiem at the American Conservatory of Chicago and a member of the band Beyond Blue, which was selected for the Ed McMahon-hosted television show "Star Search."

Both musicians were chosen by legendary County Kerry composer and concertina master Terrence "Cuz" Teahan to join his traditional Irish group.

"He taught us the old style Irish music," McCormack says. "And by that I mean the way they were taught in Ireland where a music master would go from cottage to cottage and sit down and instruct the student orally in the traditions of Irish music. That was something we were very fortunate to receive."

McCormack and FitzGerald continued that legacy with the Wailin' Banshees, which also featured Bert McMahon (banjo) and Mary McDonagh (fiddle), but influences ranging from bluegrass to rock starting showing up in their songwriting.

"We've been influenced by a lot of different singer/songwriters through the years," McCormack says. "From the earliest age I can remember listening to guys like Burl Ives. Brian loved The Band. He's a huge follower of Robbie Robertson and Levon Helm. So we were not only performing traditional Irish music but we were starting to write our own material. We felt it was something we should both pursue, which led to the formation of Switchback."

Their music eventually reached the ear of Grammy-winning producer Lloyd Maines (Dixie Chicks), who has both played on and produced several albums for the band, including "Ghosts of the River Folk" and Switchback's new project, "Postcards from the Midwest," which is expected to be released by year's end.

That album is also one of three recordings - along with "Bolinree" (2005) and "Falling Water River" (2006) - that is currently being scored for full orchestra. McCormack says the idea is to perform selections from those albums with community orchestras across the country beginning in 2012.

In the meantime, however, Switchback continues to tour in support of "Ghosts of the River Folk."

"We're really proud of this album," McCormack says. "There's an energy to it that just matches that part of the Midwest where a couple will just take off their shoes and get up and dance."

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-- WHAT: Switchback

-- WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday

-- WHERE: The Acorn Theater, 107 Generations Drive, Three Oaks

-- HOW MUCH: \$20

-- CONTACT: 756-3879 or www.acorntheater.com

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