

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

## Switchback carries the spirit of John Hartford

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ • Special to the Post-Dispatch | Posted: Thursday, December 2, 2010 12:00 am

'Ghosts of the River Folk,' the latest album by American roots music and Celtic soul duo Switchback, has a St. Louis connection: the late banjo virtuoso and singer-songwriter John Hartford, who grew up in University City.

"There's a song on the album that is really the centerpiece, called 'The Mayfly Dance,'" says guitarist, mandolinist and vocalist Brian FitzGerald. He and Marty McCormack, who plays bass and also sings, were "fortunate enough to open for John Hartford once in Lansing, Iowa. It was right on the shores of the Mississippi, which was very near and dear to his heart."



"It was one of his last shows, but he put on a wonderful act that night. But there was a moment where he said, 'Oh no, the mayflies have hatched.' And they were flying around in huge proportion. Luckily, they put the mercury lights on him and they all kind of flocked up there and created this halo effect. It was magic, visually.

"The song is like a journal entry. That's also how we got the album title. There's a line in there about the mayflies, how they're almost like ghosts of the river folk."

FitzGerald and McCormack have been making music together since 1986, when they joined the band of Irish music composer and concertina master Terrence "Cuz" Teahan. Later, they formed another Celtic group, the Wailin' Banshees, before becoming a duo in 1993.

Based in Chicago, the duo is no stranger to St. Louis. Over the years, Switchback has worked its way through the Venice Café, the Broadway Oyster Bar, Off Broadway and at events held in the studio and performance space of St. Louis artist Bill Christman.

"When we were really scrappin', we were playing anywhere," FitzGerald says. "We did a lot of stuff for seniors back then. We were able to do an entire tour in St. Louis just by playing an array of nursing homes and retirement homes. We were so well versed in the music of their generation that it worked. It was actually a lot of fun."

These days, Switchback calls Focal Point its home base for two concerts each year. Elsewhere, they're heavily booked throughout the year, although now those dates tend to be more of the concert hall-festival type.

Another venue that played an important role in the band's development is FitzGerald's family bar and concert venue in Berwyn, Ill. — which is called, unsurprisingly, FitzGerald's.

"Being as well versed in Irish music as we were, it was important for us to be able to come in off a tour and go to the bar and see the Texas Tornados or Joe Ely, or whoever was up onstage," he says. "It was such a great exposure to different sounds, which did more and more to develop that Americana side of Switchback. We had great influences left and right."