

THE HAWK EYE

Switchback doubling up

Duo to perform two shows this weekend.

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If you're itching for a live band to start off the new year, look no further than the unique music of the American roots and Celtic soul band Switchback.

The duo will perform at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Starr's Cave Nature Center and at 8 p.m. Saturday at the American Legion Hall in Donnellson, and they plan on bringing down the house with the kind of music a lot of Iowans grew up on.

"We're definitely a Midwestern roots music band, but we incorporate a lot of different styles," said bass player and tenor Martin McCormack.

McCormack's bass has been complementing bandmate Brian FitzGerald's guitar and mandolin for more than 20 years. They will be joined on stage by percussionist Nick Hirka, who may just get some help from Japanese drummer Takeshi Horiuchi.

In 1986, FitzGerald was a mandolin student of Jethro Burns and already had been touring with Clifton Chenier when he met McCormack, an award-winning vocal

student and member of the "Star Search"-selected band Beyond Blue. They were chosen by legendary Irish composer and concertina master Terrence "Cuz" Teahan to join his traditional Irish group, and Teahan taught FitzGerald and McCormack the old country techniques of Irish music. This made them one of the last generations of musicians to be directly influenced by Teahan.

"When Brian and I first met, we were both playing in Irish bands, and we were taught the old traditional country Irish music," McCormack said. "We had a lot of the old Irish singers teaching us. We really fell in love with that kind of music."

By 1988, shortly before Teahan's death, the duo continued his musical legacy with the Wailin' Banshees, joining forces with Irish banjo great Bert McMahan and Chicago fiddle legend Mary McDonagh. The Banshees flourished, but it was the power of seeing such Texan greats as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Joe Ely and Rodney Crowell who fueled FitzGerald and McCormack's songwriting and ultimately led to the formation of Switchback in 1993.

Their first album, "Ain't Going Back" (1994), was a commercial success, and their music eventually reached the ear of Grammy-winning producer Lloyd Maines, who then produced several albums for the band. The duo managed a heavy touring schedule, opening for such acts as The Moody Blues, Leon Russell, Lee Greenwood, John Hartford and Beausoleil.

Switchback still plays more than 200 shows a year, no matter how large or small the audience.

"We're really a hard-working band. We're not just a band that plays clubs. We opened in front of 15,000 people for The Moody Blues, and we've played in front of 10 kids at the library in Burlington, Vt.," McCormack said. "We're a band for all reasons."

The duo is as familiar with Burlington, Iowa, as they are Burlington, Vt., and have been playing concerts at Starr's Cave and Donnellson for several years. FitzGerald was born in Lansing, Iowa, and McCormack was born in Woodstock, Ill., so they consider southeast Iowa to be their back yard. They also appear on Iowa Public Television frequently.

"We're very fan friendly. We really involve our fans. We took some of our fans on a tour of Ireland last September," McCormack said. "We go there every year."

Price of the concert at Starr's Cave Nature Center is \$10 for adults and \$2 for children 18 and younger. There is no set fee for the concert in Donnellson, which is part of the Music Under the Watertower series, but the suggested donation is \$10.

For more information about Switchback or to hear their music, visit their website at www.waygoodmusic.com.

The Hawk Eye

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