

Them Coulee Boys

Bring Midwest Americana to Virginia



Them Coulee Boys performed a set at the Tin Pan last Wednesday to celebrate the release of their new record, "Die Happy." Photo by Alessandro Latour

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Staff Writer

“All we know about your state so far is this restaurant, a gas station and those cool little stickers they hand out that say ‘Virginia is for lovers,’” said guitarist and vocalist Soren Staff to an attentive evening crowd. “And we’ve loved it so far.”

Them Coulee Boys, an Americana band from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, are in the midst of a tour to celebrate the release of their sophomore record, “Die Happy.” They performed a set at Tin Pan last Wednesday.

“I love songwriters who make it challenging for the listener,” Staff said at the show. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea marketably, but I like it,” he added just before Beau Janke played the soft and thoughtful opening piano chords to “Hand of God, Pt. 1.”

Before his foray into the world of banjos and mandolins, Staff was a punk rocker. His punk rock band with some friends in high school was his introduction to creative performance.

“When I got to college they wouldn’t let me have an amp in the dorm,” Staff said. “So I picked up an acoustic guitar and really kind of fell in love with it after that.”

The acoustic got him more acquainted with the country and folk music he heard on the radio growing up.

Them Coulee Boys got their start at a summer camp in northern Wisconsin where Staff and banjo-picker Janke were camp counselors. “We needed something to relax us and unwind once all the campers left,” Staff said. “He had a banjo and I had a guitar so we started jamming and playing.”

The two continued to jam together for a few years before Soren Staff’s brother, mandolin player Jens Staff, joined them. And with the addition of Neil Krause on bass, Them Coulee Boys were born.

Although Soren Staff traded the world of abrasive and aggressive punk music for folky, bouncy Americana, he hasn’t left behind his punk roots.

“I think at the heart of both Americana and punk is being sincere with your actions and words,” Staff said. “That was the lyrical connection for me.”

The show featured support from Patrick Phalen IV on drums and the perpetual clapping and smiling from the audience. The single “Find Your Muse” included an opportunity for some creative crowd participation, with concertgoers rubbing their hands together to simulate the sound of a shaker or a tambourine. “Take Her Easy” — from the band’s debut, “Dancing in the Dim Light” — was a swampy foot-stomper with an easily memorized chorus; “If you’ve got to take her from me/ would you take her easy?” Soaring vocal harmonies and daringly fast banjo solos earned a standing ovation at the end of the night.

“Pray You Don’t Get Lonely” kicks off the record on a more somber note, as Soren Staff croons, “Life moves fast/ and it don’t feel holy/ you get sad/ pray you don’t get lonely,” before transitioning into a more optimistic and upbeat passage.

“Only One” is an endearing piece that finds the singer looking at his reflection in his loved ones with a spirit of anticipation and joy. “5’6” Monument” was my favorite moment. It’s a deeply emotional, if sonically predictable, ballad about people who come and go through the lives of others without knowing the profound impact they leave behind.

Last Wednesday’s performance at Tin Pan was Them Coulee Boys’ first visit to Virginia. “Virginia’s for lovers, right?” asked Janke at the show. “That’s a cool motto. I don’t know what it means, but I like it.”

“Die Happy” can be streamed on Spotify, Apple Music and Amazon Music. More information about Them Coulee Boys, including upcoming tour dates, can be found at themcouleeboys.com/tour



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