

Music

Silas is blue-collar and proud of it

Members of the Eugene band work double shifts to keep music alive

BY SERENA MARKSTROM
The Register-Guard

Silas considers itself a "workingman's band." Lately, the five members with day jobs have been working extra hard on the music side, managing to play frequent local gigs and record their first professional-grade album at Bill Barnett's Gung Ho Studios.

The Eugene band with a political penchant has been together in various incarnations for almost a decade. The quintet has been performing as Silas for about three years.

"We've been Bush-bashing since 2003," says lead vocalist Todd Dennis, who also writes the songs for the band.

Saturday at the Wetlands Brew Pub & Sports Bar is the official CD release party for the self-titled album, timed to coincide with one band member's birthday. There will be another release party June 16 at the Overtime Tavern, 770 S. Bertelsen Road — a workingman's watering hole, band members say.

Music fuses with politics

Dennis says he's written songs with messages since his activist days, but he once believed politics and music should stay in their own corners.

"I see music as an art form and I think it's more pure than politics," Dennis says during a recent interview at a Eugene coffee shop. Before, "I was too much of a purist and idealist" to mix the two.

He's changed his tune. Now he cuts songs critical of everything from suburban sprawl to the No Child Left Behind laws to religious hypocrisy with Silas' signature Americana sound.

During his idealist days, Dennis says he carried the boulder-sized burden of wanting badly to change the world, all at once. He still believes people can change the world.

"Now I'm content to drop one pebble at a time," says the singer, who as a therapist sees



The members of Silas have day jobs in addition to playing in the band. But they're not out to make it big. They're more interested in selling enough of their first CD to make another one.

CONCERT PREVIEW

Scotland Barr & the Slow Drags, Silas, Saltlick

What: Silas CD release party

When: 10 p.m. Saturday

Where: Wetlands, 922 Garfield St.

Admission: \$3 at the door

the struggles poor people face every day.

The songs are "stories about common people." But he says none are biographical of a specific person, although they reflect real experiences, some gleaned from his own life living on the streets as a young man.

"I think if you develop good characters, then you can put them in the most mundane situations" and have an interesting song, he says.

Guitar player Steve Arriola joins the interview as Dennis lists songwriting influences. The list includes Woodie Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Steve Earle and

Neil Young.

Silas music swabs over a wide range of styles, including roots, Americana, country, rock and blues. Arriola is what Dennis calls a "chameleon" on the guitar, and says any twang in the tunes can be traced to his guitar attack.

"It's weird," Arriola says "a Chicano kid from L.A. playing twang."

CD took longer than anticipated

The new album was a long time coming, Arriola says.

"It took us a while to figure out how to finance it," he says. "It's been a ride."

They went into the studio with intentions of getting the whole thing done in 80 hours, thinking they would record most of the songs live. It ended up taking more like 140 hours as producer Barnett got more interested in the project, working in extra instrumentation and overdubs.

With families and jobs, the members of Silas play in the band mainly because they enjoy it. They want to sell enough

copies of the CD to finance another one.

"We just know we are good friends and we just wanted to figure out a way to make music as much as possible," Arriola says.

The band has been more successful on the road, drawing bigger crowds in places such as Moscow, Idaho, than here in Eugene.

"It's because we are from somewhere else. ... You can't be a prophet in your own village," Arriola says, referring to advice his father-in-law gave him about why it's important to get your art out of town.

Here in Eugene, Silas members say their crowd is more likely to be NPR-listening professors than "scenesters."

"You're not going to be socially cool if you show up at a Silas gig," Dennis says. "There's a market for our music, but it's not here. ..."

"We don't expect to have mass appeal. We'd really be delusional if we thought that. It's

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not about trying to be cool."

Other Silas members are Scott Dillinger on keyboards and accordion, and Sean Brennan on drums and other percussion. Bass player Todd Barnes is new to the band, allowing regular bass player Stephen Spatz to play pedal steel at the CD release party.

Music with left-leaning

lyrics but a boot-stomping, rockin' sound probably could find fans in every city; maybe potential fans just need to know where to look. A good place to start is www.silasband.com, where you can listen to the music for free.

Arriola says the most important thing is that these buddies

get to continue playing together, making music that is good for their creative souls and lets them express their world view.

"Generally, we don't go over well in straight-up country bars," he says.

"As soon as they catch wind of the lyrics, they are getting a rope."