

BIFA: Groanbox, BMF Orchestra perform at venues from trail to concert hall

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Special to the Daily



At first, the Groanbox trio of accordionist Michael Ward-Bergeman, percussionist Paul Clifford and guitarist and banjo player Cory Seznec might strike you as a roots band. But the genre-bending group defies classification, drawing influences from around the world. On Saturday, Aug. 15, they join the BMF Orchestra for the second-ever performance of "Groanbox," a piece they commissioned from contemporary composer David Bruce.

Nick Sinclair / Special to the Daily |

IF YOU GO

What: Trail Mix concert with Groanbox

When: 3 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 13

Where: Illinois Creek Trail, Breckenridge

Cost: Free

What: Groanbox

When: 6-7 p.m. Friday, Aug. 14

Where: Festival Square, 117 Washington Ave., Breckenridge

Cost: Free

More information: Visit <http://www.groanboxboys.com>

What: Exploring the Fringe: BMF Orchestra finale with Groanbox

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 15

Where: Riverwalk Center, 150 W. Adams Ave., Breckenridge

Cost: Tickets range from \$7 to \$40, depending on seating

Tickets: Call the Riverwalk box office at (970) 547-3100, or visit <http://www.breckenridgemusicfestival.com>

What do you get when you mix accordion with violin, folk with classical music?

Nature sounds played on an assortment of instruments, or instruments made from an assortment of natural objects? You'll have to come to the concerts masterminded by Michael Ward-Bergeman in partnership with the [Breckenridge Music Festival Orchestra](#) to find out.

These concerts will take place in three different venues, from forest to street stage to concert hall. The whimsical collaboration starts with an acoustic performance on [Illinois Creek Trail](#) at 3 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 13. This is a preview to Trail Mix, a series of 24 on-trail concerts to take place from Friday, Aug. 14, through Sunday, Aug. 23, as part of the inaugural Breckenridge International Festival of Arts.

Then at 6 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 14, Michael Ward-Bergeman and his group, [Groanbox](#), play the street stage in Festival Square at the center of Breckenridge's new Arts District for the first of 10 evening concerts taking place nightly over the course of the festival.



The trio — which features Ward-Bergeman on accordion, Canadian percussionist Paul Clifford and Franco-American guitarist and banjo player Cory Seznec — might at first strike you as a roots band. But the genre-bending group defies classification, drawing influences from around the world. Members are flying in from all over — sound engineer and producer Oscar Cainer from London, Seznec from Ethiopia, Clifford from Ontario and Ward-Bergeman from New Orleans — to perform at the Breckenridge event.

FESTIVAL AT THE FRINGE

The centerpiece of the collaboration takes place on Saturday, Aug. 15, when Groanbox and the Breckenridge Music Festival Orchestra kick off BIFA's Riverwalk Center concert series. It is the final concert of the BMF orchestra's new Festival at the Fringe, as well as the orchestra's 2015 season finale. Ward-Bergeman — a classically trained musician who has played with orchestras around the world — was selected as artistic partner for the final concert.

"We were looking for somebody who would get out of the ordinary with creative ideas, a truly fine artist doing high-profile things with top-notch performers," said Marcia Kaufmann, BMF executive director

The choice to bring Groanbox into the project was natural.

"We've played in the woods before and played the trees," Ward-Bergeman said. "This group I work with is at home in the woods as well as pubs and concert halls. They resonated with the concept and jumped on the idea right away."

Saturday's program includes the second-ever performance of "Groanbox," a composition the group commissioned from contemporary composer David Bruce that marries unusual instruments such as accordion and banjo with chamber orchestra. The group debuted the work in 2009 with the Metropolis Ensemble in New York. It has not been performed since.

"We love the piece. To have the opportunity to do it again is something we didn't have to think twice about," Ward-Bergeman said.

He suggested bringing in creative young conductor Joshua Weilerstein to lead the evening, and together, they came up with the remainder of the program. It includes opening and closing "Tapestry" pieces, arranged by Ward-Bergeman, that incorporate nature sounds from croaking frogs to whistling birds, rendered on instruments from around the world. The orchestra will also perform Aaron Copland's "Variations on a Shaker Melody" and Beethoven's Symphony No. 4, considered one of his happier, more light-hearted pieces.

MOJO STICK

Groanbox percussionist Paul Clifford will bring an array of interesting instruments — among them the "freedom boot," a 6-foot stomping stick with bells, nails and more than 400 bottle tops from a Freedom Lager served at one of their early gigs in the United Kingdom.

"It became like a mojo stick; Groanbox' spirit is tied up in it," Ward-Bergeman said. "Some of the percussion guys from the orchestra will have the opportunity to play it, too."

The group also had a heavy log shipped to Breckenridge from Canada.

"The yew tree is now sitting in our office, all wrapped up," Kaufmann said. "It's a very mysterious package, so we'll find out."

"It certainly won't sound like a typical classical concert," said Robb Woulfe, president and CEO of Breckenridge Creative Arts, or BreckCreate, the group that is putting on the Breckenridge International Festival of Arts. "I think it will be a fun experience for the BMF musicians."

Indeed, violinist Miika Gregg expressed interest in the nature sounds and the unusual combinations of instruments. Clarinetist John Klinghammer is a fan of Bruce's compositions, and percussionist Rajesh Prasad looks forward to participating in the adventurous new Trail Mix series. Even though the BMF season closes on Saturday, Aug. 15, several of the musicians will stay on to take part in the trailside concerts.

ABOUT GROANBOX

The Groanbox performances will be the only gig this year for the group, which released a self-titled album celebrating a decade together in 2015. Recording locations feature prominently on it — from a rural shack in Ontario to the underground caves of Bonnechere — their sounds playing a key part in the record's auditory landscape.

Location is vital to Ward-Bergeman, who recounted with palpable excitement the vastly different quality of listening he experienced when Groanbox — which generally tours noisy pubs in the U.K. — played the concert hall in 2009.

"When you put raw folk music on a concert-hall stage, people hear different things and have a different experience," he said. "I've learned to listen completely differently as a result of that experience."



He hopes that people will come to the concerts in all three locations, which will feature some of the same sounds, textures and musical elements arranged in different ways for each venue.

“So many classical composers have been moved by folk music,” he said. “By putting our music in different spaces where the qualities of listening are different — who knows what will happen? Maybe next time someone goes for a walk they will hear something different. That would be my hope, that people have an experience and listen differently because of it.

“To have the opportunity to do this in three different places — the woods, the stage in the street and the concert hall? There are not too many other things you can ask for.”

ARTS DESTINATION

Kaufmann said the BMF is really enjoying stretching its wings and trying new things within its vision of offering varied, excellent programming.

“What’s happening in Breckenridge as an arts destination is really exciting, from the arts campus to stepping up what the Riverwalk Center has to offer in terms of lights and sound, to programming this exciting arts festival,” she said. “The BMF is delighted to be part of the process.”

“It’s a great collaboration,” Woulfe said about the partnership between BreckCreate and the BMF. “The BMF finishes their season, and we start ours. It’s been interesting for them to explore more fringe programming, which is perfect for us — the fringier the better. We are thrilled the Groanbox team is kicking this off, and in so many venues for folks to experience.”

Ward-Bergeman said the collaboration is a creative adventure that makes sense in a lot of different ways for the trio of groups involved.

“You have to thank the orchestra for being up for it, and for being so open to collaborate on what is really an unknown in a lot of ways, and also the town for thinking so ambitiously about what they want to do with music and culture,” he said. “The spirit is amazing — to try something like this.”

Erica Marciniac is a paid writer for the Breckenridge Music Festival. Presented by Breckenridge Creative Arts, the Breckenridge International Festival of Arts is a celebration of adventure, play and creativity that runs Friday, Aug. 14, through Sunday, Aug. 23. Find more information and a full schedule at breckcreate.org/bifa, or search “BIFA” at <http://www.summitdaily.com>.

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