

Don't try to label the Zac Brown Band -- just listen



By Michele Coppola | Special to The Oregonian

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There are two kinds of country fans these days: those who haven't seen the [Zac Brown Band](#) live, and those who have.

The first group is likely to be heard wailing about the sad state of contemporary country music, deriding it as just so much pop-infused garbage bearing no resemblance to the "real" country of Jennings, Cash and Haggard. They wouldn't be inclined to spend the money to see a band whose Grammy award-winning hits fill the space between Jason Aldean and Taylor Swift on the radio.

The second crowd? They understand that -- just like back in Hag's day -- there's a lot of great music being made along with the lowest-common-denominator detritus.

Seeing the Zac Brown Band when they play the Sleep Country Amphitheater on Friday will likely make you a solid member of that latter group.

"Really for us the music comes first," drummer Chris "Sweets" Fryar said in a recent telephone interview. "If you don't have a great show musically speaking, then the rest of it is just bells and whistles. There are plenty of artists out there, who, the music suffers for whatever reason, and they try to

make up for it by having the live show be really exciting from a visual perspective."

The musical pyrotechnics the Zac Brown Band is famous for delivering in their live performances attest not only to the band's skill, but also to the wide range of influences that create their sound. In addition to the mellow pop-folk of their radio hits, you're also likely to hear an impressive Metallica cover, Monroe-worthy bluegrass and lots of reggae-infused party songs.

"Zac Brown Band is the most challenging project that I've ever been a part of," says Fryar. "We all come from different musical backgrounds and different musical influences and we try to allow all those influences to come in and color the music."

That's evident on "Uncaged," the band's latest album, which won a Grammy for best country album this year. Of the singles released from that record, the least successful was a straight-up fiddle-burner without a trace of pop gloss called "The Wind." It's likely to bring the house down Friday night, even if it didn't set radio on fire.

That said, the band is still most closely identified with their 2008 breakthrough hit "Chicken Fried," which is an unmistakably country pean to family, God and country. It's one that Fryar says they never really get tired of performing.

"I try to find something new every time I'm playing it. We're all very sensitive to that ... we allow the music to grow; if something subtly changes we don't fight it, we all kind of go with it. It stays fresh because it always is."

It also helps that the song is an audience favorite. "When you've got a crowd full of people who are all singing the words along with you it certainly makes it fun and very enjoyable to do."

What's also enjoyable for the band is the opportunity to play the Portland area again.

"It's really beautiful there," says Fryar, who got the nickname "Sweets" because of his fondness for sugary treats. He remembers the region not only for its natural attractions but also for his encounter with a famous Voodoo Doughnut.

"I had this maple-glazed thing with bacon on it. Man, it was amazing."