

Show and Tell

First word on Ramshackle

BY JEFF TRAINOR

Show

The few, the comfortable, and the well-dressed treated themselves to much luxury on New Year's Eve—including a slice of local music history. Deschutes Brewery hosted a sit-down soiree in the third-story Mountain Room at their Colorado Avenue bottling facility that night, enlisting the talents of a newly-formed quartet, Ramshackle, for entertainment.

Before the band's first-ever public performance, fine wine and beersky flowed to lubricate a tantalizing five-course meal (featuring an entrée of roasted filet mignon and broiled lobster tail). The room buzzed with conversation and flickered with candlelight, every white-clothed table packed with composed, businesslike patrons sporting spendy reservations. It was enough to make a commie reviewer wish briefly—guiltily—for affluence.

Around 10:30 pm, Mark Ransom, Tyler Mason, David Bowers, and Peter Sussmann set to work on a mostly-fed and loosening crowd. Ransom led the first couple of songs with his delicate, laid-back vocals. Highlighting the irony of playing "God Bless the Taco Stand" at such a highbrow event, he explained the lyrics once the song was over: "You know, the original one. On Hill Street."

Bowers then brought his own vocals and lyrical sense to bear, introducing signature high desert blues and slide guitar elements into the mix. After a few tunes and the elimination of a feedback glitch, the crowd started to warm to the diverse grooves laid in front of them as a sixth course—allowing Mason to lay into basslines with a funky, yet professionally reserved playful spirit; Sussmann to tighten up his swingin' arms on the drum kit, and Ransom and Bowers to exchange exploratory guitar lines in extended jams.

Further attesting to the band's jam-compatibility, it was Ramshackle's very tasteful (in fact, excellent) cover of the Grateful Dead's adopted classic, "I Know You Rider," that moved portions of the room to full-reveling mode. Heeding the call of Sussmann's locomotive drumbeat, one couple and a female/female/male threesome stormed the smallish floor separating the band from the front two dinner tables and got their jiggy on.

Thereafter the mini-dancefloor was fair game, the newborn band luring off-chain yuppies to shake they things to more train song goodness (Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues"), more of Ransom's cosmic love jams, and so on.



Tell

Sharing leadership duties on voice and guitar, Bowers and Ransom epitomize the potential for Ramshackle to cover a broad expanse of subject matter and style. The general idea of the band's future is to play original material from both men, as well as select covers ("A good song is a good song," says Ransom)—and in practice, the Bowers/Ransom dual songwriter/frontman configuration sounds sweetly logical.

Still, even in a performance scene as small as Bend's, it took a while for Ransom and Bowers to make the connection. They had certainly crossed paths before; early on, they did a handoff for a regular

Pizza Mondo gig; subsequently, they played as a duo and shared stages here and there. Ransom attained a new level of familiarity with Bowers' boot-stomping desert-musing, workingman's acoustic sound when Bowers recorded his solo disc, *Postcard*, at Ransom's Bond Street Studios.

When the call came in from Deschutes Brewery to liven up their New Year's party, Ransom first assembled a band with Sussmann, Mason, local all-string player Ted Brainerd, and himself. Brainerd had to back out because of family health issues, though, and it was then that Ransom conceived of Bowers as another excellent fit to fill out the quartet.

"He's always been like our Neil Young," Ransom says of Bowers' role in Bend's cast of musical characters. "He's got a little more of a raw edge to him. His sound is more bluesy folk rock—as opposed to funk or groove rock—which is more the way my music lends itself."

The vibrant contrast in the two's musical approaches hasn't escaped Bowers' notice, either. Nonetheless, the long-lon troubadour was eager to sign up for the Ramshackle performance.

"I think Mark and I have a Yin-Yang thing going," says Bowers, "where I play the grungy primitive, and he is theory-savvy, pulling out those bizarre Steely Dicks."

Of the highly skilled supporting players, Bowers says: "Tyler and Peter are incredibly adaptable as a rhythm section and listen to song structure better than a bass player or drummer I've played with."

As for the future of Ramshackle, Ransom and Bowers are both eager to continue playing, and optimistic that their new quartet will eventually yield some recorded

material.

"Everybody's just different enough in their styles—and just similar enough—that I think we have something really interesting," says Ransom. "The fact that [Bowers and I] both write a lot means that there's gonna be no shortage of material, and we can write with the intent of this band performing and recording."

"I feel that Ramshackle is very much a community band," Bowers says, "rather than a collection of rock egomaniacs trying to blow away a room. The audience is what really makes this all happen, and we have a strong sense of that."