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Bluegrass band Hit & Run hits the ground running

By Stewart Oksenhorn
Aspen Times Staff Writer

Three years ago, the Rockygrass Festival made a Coloradan of Rebecca Hoggan. Hoggan at the time was a 24-year-old singer and guitarist, festival-hopping around the country and dreaming of forming a bluegrass band. She attended Rockygrass, the top-shelf bluegrass festival thrown by Planet Bluegrass in Lyons, and was duly impressed. And she was even more taken with the music scene in nearby Boulder.

"I saw Boulder and realized how many musicians were here," said Hoggan, a native of Richmond, Va. "The dream was to start a young, contemporary bluegrass band."

Once settled, Hoggan summoned Todd Livingston. A dobro player who Hoggan had met while she was at the University of Michigan, Livingston was looking to give up his chef's career in favor of full-time picking. Livingston arrived in Boulder in the fall of 2000, and within a year-and-a-half the two had assembled the players who would become the bluegrass quintet Hit & Run.

Just as Rockygrass gave Hoggan reason to settle in Colorado, the festival has also sustained her. Last year, Hoggan and her Hit & Run mates — Livingston, mandolinist John Frazier, banjoist Aaron Youngberg and bassist Erin Coats — participated in the Rockygrass band competition. The band figured its chances at winning were close to nil: They had played only two gigs as a quintet prior to the contest, and the competition was stiff.

"It was like we knew we weren't going to win," said Hoggan, who started playing folk-rock guitar at age 11, and got turned onto bluegrass while studying music and comparative literature at Michigan. "We knew Old School Freight Train, from Virginia, was going to win, and Kansas Heart, real pros from Kansas, would take second. And then there was us, who had done two public performances as a group. We'd rehearsed, but we weren't totally ready."

Turns out they were. Hit & Run won the Rockygrass competition. And what did they do for an encore? Last month, they won the Telluride Bluegrass Festival band competition, becoming the first group to pull off the double win.



Hit & Run has honestly been caught off guard by the quick success. They don't have a CD to sell; they don't even have a van to drive around and impress bluegrass fans beyond Colorado.

So Hit & Run has been concentrating its energies on the home folks. Since the Rockygrass win, they have been playing festivals and clubs all over Colorado. For the rest of the summer, they are booked to play Colorado gigs every weekend.

That touring schedule has Hit & Run playing all kinds of settings. Hot off the Telluride victory, they performed two weeks ago at the first Sunlight Mountain Bluegrass Festival outside of Glenwood Springs, where they found a small audience but an exceptional level of music. Last winter, Hit & Run played the Midwinter Festival, at a Holiday Inn in suburban Denver; at the picturesque Bluegrass on the River bash in Pueblo, they played on a stage right on the Arkansas River for 3,000 people. Later this month they play a main-stage set at Rockygrass — the booty for winning last year's contest — and their first headlining slot at Boulder's Fox Theatre.

Hit & Run makes its first public appearance in Aspen on Saturday, July 19, as part of the first Aspen Highlands Microbrew Festival. Hit & Run performs from 4-7 p.m., after the Grand Tasting and just before a screening of the cult film "Strange Brew."

To Hoggan, Hit & Run probably doesn't seem quite the instant success it appears to be from the outside. After Livingston joined her in Boulder, things were slow at first. "We spent one long, lonely winter temping, doing everything, waiting for a band. But by the following fall, we had met everyone in Hit & Run and started rehearsing," said Hoggan. The group had its first gig — without current mandolinist Frazier, who would join three months later — in March 2002.

The Rockygrass title accelerated Hit & Run's momentum. "That catapulted things, made things move a little quicker," said Hoggan. "It was real cool to have that attention. It's actually cool that Planet Bluegrass takes the trouble to put on a competition. It gives the bands recognition. But it also gives them a goal. It made us really polish up our music."

It has helped that the members of Hit & Run have a clear idea of the music they want to play.

"We want each song to have a groove and feel that is tight and exciting," she said. "Like Alison Krauss — they can play something so slow, but it still has a groove. Traditional bluegrass has a groove, but a different type of groove."

"The modern groove is what appeals to us. From the get-go, that's what we wanted to do."