

GET INTO THE ACT

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SKULLDIGGERS

The Skulldiggers began in 2002 simply as a mellow side-project for a group of friends.

"We just liked to get together and jam out acoustically on Grateful Dead-type stuff," says mandolin player Fred Gilmartin. The group especially enjoyed performing songs made famous by Grateful Dead frontman Jerry Garcia and mandolinist David Grisman. Before long The Skulldiggers began tackling tunes by other '60s and '70s folk and rock artists such as Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Pink Floyd -- all while sticking to acoustic instruments. The quartet then added some country (Johnny Cash) and blues (B.B. King).

"What we end up doing is we play the songs we like, not necessarily what's popular," Gilmartin says. "We put our own spin on it, and we've found a lot of people who like that too."

Their spin has a bluegrass feel, with some unconventional instrumentation and nice multi-part vocal harmonies. The group's signature song -- their rousing set-closer -- has become "Hey Joe," the rock standard best known as an electric guitar scorcher by Jimi Hendrix.

"What happens is that we play through the lyrical part at a normal, slow pace, and as the lyric starts to end we pick it up," Gilmartin says. "We turn it into a bluegrass pace and then as that progresses we go to about triple time where we play at blazing-meltdown-type speed."

With a stellar reputation for their live set, the Skulldiggers are in the enviable position of having more offers to play than their busy personal and professional schedules allow. But they hope to play out more and get into the recording studio in the coming year.

Josh Berk