

Songwriter Gets Serious

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ALBANY — If singer/songwriter Jim Gaudet ever decides to make his music career his top priority, Justin Townes Earle better do a two-step to the left and let him dance through and Ray Wylie Hubbard should give him a laminated pass to cross the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Austin Chronicle included one of Gaudet's early cassettes in its top 10 for the year. In the late '90s, with two CDs on 800-PRIME-CD, his label had him traveling all over the Northeast on weekends. Area journalists — myself included — have uniformly lauded his work since he first started making the rounds of the coffeehouse open mics, particularly at Caffe Lena and 8th Step.

And when he played the Wintergrass Festival in Seattle recently with his new group The Railroad Boys, they did two sets and got standing ovations and encores both times.

"It was really something," Gaudet recalled, as if he couldn't believe the words coming out of his own mouth. "I wanted to break right down at that point in time and cry."

Gaudet and his band will make two scheduled appearances in the next week, unprecedented for an artist who until very recently has been off the local radar for seven years. On Saturday, The Railroad Boys will share The Linda stage with Red Haired Strangers, Annie and The Hedonists and Street Corner Holler as part of Roots Music Festival 3. On Monday, they will perform their regular standing-room-only First Monday gig at McGeary's in Albany.

Gaudet first started making the open mic night rounds more than two decades ago.

"I just banged around. I never wrote any songs. I just would play John Prine tunes and stuff, so nothing really too spicy to add into that," he said. "I never thought I could write songs, but I started going to the open mics, and

little by little I realized if I was ever gonna get to play Lena's or the 8th Step or do any of these coffeehouse gigs that I'd have to be an original singer/songwriter.

"So I started writing some things, and it was really the support I got through the open mic network that gave me the confidence to believe I really could write a song or two. Really, in the beginning I was writing like crazy. I was just writing tons of stuff."

Since then, Gaudet has been in and out of the game a few times, leaving for years rather than months and always giving his family and his day job top priority.

This latest project sort of snuck up on him. While recording the aptly titled "Recalling It Quits" album with Michael Eck — producing it at guitarist Sten Isachsen's studio — Gaudet started hanging out with Isachsen, bassist Bobby Ristau and fiddle player Tim Wechgelaer. One of the songs they recorded was called "Railroad Boys," so when they started getting gigs, they co-opted the name from the song.

"One thing led to another," Gaudet said. "The project was a very little project."

The follow-up CD, "No Questions Asked," contains three covers — a Jimmy Driftwood, Merle Haggard and Lennon-McCartney — 11 originals and is as good as anything from "No Exit" or Eck's various incarnations with songwriting. It stands tall with most of the current national releases in the bluegrass/Americana genre.

On "Gittarr Pick" Gaudet sings: "We make the same amount of money we did 20 years ago. Only thing is that food and gas cost 10 times more."

He has the wit and wisdom of Loudon Wainwright III on "Handle The Truth" when he sings, "I might not be Fred Flintstone, but I could make your bed rock." (Older readers can explain that to their youngsters.) Or, "We're gonna regret this in the morning. We can sleep until the afternoon."