

By Wendy K. Leigh

The word “*anomaly*” could apply to half the people walking the streets of Seattle these days: *unexpected ... exceptional ... a rarity* With hundreds of tech startups simmering in the city, genius abounds – but if you’d rather see an undercurrent of Seattle talent erupting into a ferocious spitfire, spend an evening with some of Seattle’s most innovative musicians: the brainiac, cross-cultural, indie-art-rocksters of **Ravenna Woods**.

The rumble of percussive energy that is Ravenna Woods has been described by **Spin Magazine** as haunting urban folk with eerie vocal harmonies, spiraling fingerpicked guitar and “*a crucial reminder to Seattle’s current scene: Just because it’s acoustic doesn’t mean it must be pastoral and warm.*” Indeed it doesn’t – and isn’t.



Ravenna’s evolution has been a steady unleashing of frenetic, yet deeply melodic tunes that culminates on **October 21** with the band’s newest EP release at the **Sunset Tavern**. The new songs, gathered up as *Alleyways and Animals* and released by **Rocket Heart Records**, reflect five years of Ravenna band members laying an intricate web across Seattle by criss-crossing fields such as technology, ethnic musicology, modern dance, anthropology, graphic arts and just-plain urban grunge.

Ravenna Woods has recently embraced such diverse crossover performances as a choreographed, live modern-dance show playing their entire “Jackals” recording, assembled by Joel Myers from the Tacoma City Ballet, as well as a live performance with the powerful Seattle Kokon Taiko, a traditional Japanese drum corps from the international district. Ravenna lyricist, vocalist and guitarist Chris Cunningham explains that his band’s approach to drums is very similar to Taiko.

“Our drummer Matt Badger’s musicality has a lot of moving parts, accents and dynamics ... capable of being both thunderous and intricately melodic.”

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Though the Ravenna Woods gang is Seattle to the core, there are layers of history and outside experience underpinning their collective musicality. Cunningham's background in cultural anthropology led to a stint teaching in the Marshall Islands that produced some of his darkest lyrics in songs such as *Ghosts*, highlighting the effects of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands by the U.S. government.

He's profoundly influenced by continuing travels and musical projects in Africa, including compositions for a documentary about the unifying effect of music amidst election violence. Using technology to bridge the distance from Seattle to Kenya, he collaborates on projects with hip-hop artists in Kibera, the pervasive urban slums of Nairobi, which stretches his perceptions way beyond predefined boundaries.

"The fundamentals of how they approach the rhythm is different from how I grew up; what's ingrained in my head. What is natural for them, feels like it's twisting a spoon around in my brain!"

Familial roots dig deep within the band as well. Vocalist, keys and percussionist Brantley Duke has some pretty colorful ties to the blues and jazz culture of the Mississippi Delta, which injects a subtle soulful element to the instrumentation in Ravenna's recordings and on-stage performances.

"Rumor has it that my great grandmother even taught famous bluesman Mississippi John Hurt how to play slide guitar on her back porch, after finding him passed out drunk in the back seat of her car on cold mornings."

Advanced studies in music technology and digital audio engineering by Brantley and fellow Ravenna bandmate Reed LV add to the box of tricks that increases the band's versatility and self-sufficiency.

HIGH-TECH MEETS ORGANIC URBAN

Nowhere is the band's diverse musicality more evident than in Ravenna's three new music videos for the upcoming EP release in October. The band conceptualized, self-directed, shot and edited the videos themselves, using a full-frame Canon camera with prime lenses and accessories, and editing software such as iMovie and Final Cut Pro X. Everything else is improvised on the spot, including the scenes for **Alleyways**, which were shot at night, running in the streets and alleys of Queen Anne. Cunningham explains how they pulled it off:

"Our friend Abby was hanging out the back of a hatchback, shooting us and playing the song at double speed. We had to choreograph the run so that as I was chasing after the car and singing in double time, while Brantley and Reed chased after me and we all attempted to remain in frame. We shot that at 60 frames per second, then slowed the footage down to 30 frames per second. That way my mouth matched up with the speed at which the words were being sung, but our movements are sluggish and exaggerated."

It's a calculated transition from earlier choreographed videos such as "In the World," and this more organic approach using accessible and affordable technology seems to be working. The as-yet-unreleased *Animal* video was accepted into the 2016 Sync Music Video Festival in Seattle, and autumn has brought premiers of the *Alleyways* and *Good Friend* videos by **City Arts Magazine** and **Seattle Weekly**, respectively.

Another little-known but extraordinary achievement by Ravenna band member Nic Danielson is being chosen the only American composer in the five finalists at the **5th International Film Music Competition** as part of the **Zurich Film Festival** in Switzerland on Sept. 23.

It's increasingly evident that the seemingly incongruous fields of music and technology have way more in common than appears on the surface. In fact, their creative energies seem to *feed on* one another in today's Seattle, and bands like Ravenna Woods are pushing the limits of how high-tech, low-tech, earthy/indie, and everything in between are moving the city's music scene forward in subtle ways.

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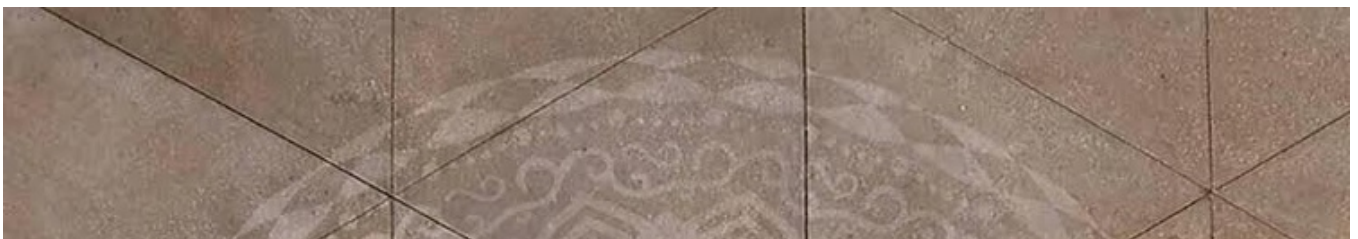
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