

THE SAN DIEGO
UT
UNION-TRIBUNE

NIGHT AND DAY

Squeeze play: Flogging Molly's Matt Hensley

The Oceanside-based accordion wiz travels the world with Celtic-punk band



More than a few musicians and skateboarders have become smash hits by appearing as part of the annual Vans Warped Tour. Flogging Molly's Matt Hensley appears to be the only one to become a smash hit, literally, while simultaneously combining music and skateboarding at a Vans Warped Tour stop.

Flogging Molly, with Suedehead and Sean Wheeler & Zander Schloss

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 6

Where: House of Blues, 1055 Fifth Ave., downtown

Tickets: Sold out

Phone: (619) 299-BLUE

Online: livenation.com

“I was skateboarding from the stage back to our tour bus on a little slalom board, as fast as I could, as I played my button accordion,” the pro-skateboarder-and-paramedic-turned-musician recalled.

“I came around a corner and (tour founder) Kevin Lyman waved to me. I waved back and hit a rock. I flew 30 feet in the air and landed on my accordion; it (the crash) went forever. My knees were bloody, my elbows were bloody. My accordion was in bits and pieces and had dug into my ribs. I got up and tried to play it, as best as anyone can after a train wreck. This was in 2009, and that incident drove me away from trying to be cocky.”

Fortunately for Hensley, who grew up in Vista and lives in Oceanside, there is no known video footage of his bloody, music-on-wheels crash. His devotion to the accordion — he usually plays a keyboard model that weighs 40 pounds — has helped him popularize the instrument with fans of Flogging Molly, which brings its nationwide Green 17 tour to House of Blues for a sold-out show on Tuesday.

With Hensley as part of its front line, the band’s rousing brand of Celtic-flavored punk-rock (or punk-rock-flavored Celtic folk music; take your pick) has enabled the one-woman, six-man Flogging Molly to thrive for 15 years. The band’s popularity has helped expose the instrument to a new generation of listeners, some of who have cited Hensley’s playing for inspiring them to take up the accordion, an instrument believed to now be nearly 200 years old.

“When I first started playing accordion, my friends thought I was out of my mind,” said Hensley, 42. “But in the back of my mind, without sounding clichéd, it sounds to me like the working class and anthems of the world, be it Mexican or French, German or Russian, or from Louisiana. It really can travel around the world — and not a whole lot of instruments can do that.”

Hensley, 42, was first drawn to the accordion as a child here, although only as a listener.

"As a kid, I'd play AM radio a lot to listen to Tejano music and I drove my mother crazy," he said with a chuckle. "I also loved banda music as a kid. To this day, I love Flaco Jimenez and the Texas Tornados. Tejano is my favorite thing. I'm in an Irish music band, but in my spare time I'm off playing Tex-Mex music."

Hensley's musical path as a teenager found him playing guitar in The Spy Kids, a North County ska band that also featured future Unwritten Law singer Scott Russo and members of Buck-O-Nine.

At 19, Hensley moved to Chicago to become a paramedic, a career path he quickly discovered he was not suited for. After three months, he enrolled at the Chicago Institute of Art. It was while living in the Windy City that his passion for the accordion really ignited, after hearing a number of Pogues-influenced local bands. After moving back here, he bought his first accordion, started taking lessons and rarely looked back.

"I pulled the trigger when I got back to San Diego," he recalled. "I could play guitar, but had no (knowledge of music) theory, so it was hard to figure out what all these buttons (on an accordion) meant. I needed to find somebody immediately to teach me. Not only did I learn to play the accordion, but I learned music.

"The first accordion I got was a piano accordion and I lugged it everywhere and drove my friends crazy. And my girlfriend -- who later became my wife -- I'd drive her crazy, playing it everywhere. Then, in a weird fluke, I ended up in a bar in L.A. and met (Flogging Molly founder) Dave King."

A year after joining the Los Angeles-based band, Hensley began playing the button accordion and then the concertina. He now hopes to take up the bandoneon, the Argentinian accordion popularized by nuevo tango master Astor Piazzolla.

Playing a 40-pound accordion can take a physical toll, especially on long concert tours. But Hensley, the former owner of Oceanside's Flying Elephant pub, enjoys performing as a solo accordionist on street corners, especially when Flogging Molly is on tour in Europe.

"I'm not busking, although I have from time to time (years ago) in an emergency situation," he said.

"But, generally, I don't put my hat down on the sidewalk (for tips). I've played out in the streets in France, Germany and Austria. I just played in Slovenia. I had just learned a song from that country and I was in a parking lot after a (Flogging Molly) show. Someone started singing that song -- I can't spell the title of it -- and I started playing along. They couldn't believe I knew this song. It was a really good feeling, to suddenly have 50 people in Slovenia sing along, at the top of their lungs."