

Have banjo — guitar, fiddle and bazouki — will travel

BY PAUL FREEMAN
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“Chameleon” is an apt title for Tim O’Brien’s latest album. A co-founder and lead vocalist of the acclaimed Hot Rize bluegrass band, he has established himself as an appealing singer-songwriter. Folk and country aficionados appreciate his forays into those genres, as well as his ongoing expansion of bluegrass parameters.

At Montalvo’s Carriage House Theater on Friday, O’Brien will perform tunes from the album, plus traditional favorites. Of solo performing, O’Brien told the Daily News, “It’s very intimate and flexible.”

He travels with four different instruments — bazouki, banjo, guitar and fiddle. “It helps when I get bored with the sound of things,” he said. “I’m always looking for another texture.”

O’Brien writes mostly on guitar. “I’ve started writing on the banjo, because it’s something I don’t understand. It helps, in a way, to play something you don’t really know. You kind of get lost. It makes simple stuff sound new again and lets you pour yourself into the song. It used to be that way with the bazouki or the mandolin, but now I know those better.”

He’s basically self-taught on the instruments. His fascination with guitar began at age 11, when he first heard the Beatles.

“As I got better at the guitar, I burrowed in deeper. I got into Doc Watson big time. I said, ‘Man, that’s the way to play guitar. It really sounds good!’”

He had found his niche. “I was kind of a nerd, maybe a little bit bookish. I wasn’t very good at team sports. This was a



Tim O’Brien will be at Montalvo in Saratoga on Friday.

way to get into something that would build a sense of self-worth. It really helped get me through that high school thing. It just kept pulling on me. I loved it.”

After a year of college, the preoccupation with music pulled him into the adventurous life of performing.

“In those days, I didn’t really need much. I probably don’t need much more now than I did then, but I think I do,” he said.

He played small clubs in the early ’70s. “If you could get a few gigs a week for \$25, you could probably pay your rent and your food bill. It was pretty cheap to live then.”

O’Brien moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to be a ski bum. “But I couldn’t afford the skiing.”

He honed his skills, went on a walk-about through Colorado and joined bands there. A Nashville resident for 13 years, he formed Hot Rize with banjo player Pete Wernick.

“When we started Hot Rize, we wanted to play traditional bluegrass and fit in with that scene. We wanted to play

with the excitement and class of the Bill Monroe and Flatt & Scruggs bands. While recognizing certain borders, we wanted to innovate with the genre. You try to find the intersection between what you like to do and what the audience likes to hear.

“That was good situation for learning the ropes of the business. Pete had contacts all over the country. National Public Radio was starting to happen. There were bluegrass shows on all those stations.

There was a bluegrass festival movement that started in the ’60s and, by the time we started in 1978, there was a full circuit of festivals for us to play. We got in on the bottom rung and climbed up over the years. I learned how to perform, how to make records, how to put on a show.”

O’Brien enjoys the festival atmosphere. “Everybody’s competing, but it’s friendly competing ...

“The bluegrass festivals are sort of like family reunions. There’s a real camaraderie to it,” he said.

His songs have been recorded by others, including country star Kathy Mattea.

His background in classic bluegrass gave him a solid foundation. “Good songs, the ones that last, are ones that are well constructed. It’s like a good house. They’re adaptable to a new audience. Part of it is the purely musical content. But a lot of it is the way the lyric works, the way it draws you in. It’s usually about some sort of basic life issue that hasn’t changed. That’s a good lesson for any writer.

“You aim to reach people. If you can open a lot of lines of communication, then you’ve succeeded. It’s like cooking — you heat the pan, mix in the right ingredients and hopefully come up with something people find satisfying.”

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