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## Nouveau retro with a twang

*Wine Without Reason goes a little country with pedal-steel player Fred Epping*

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May 17, 2013

**By Jef Fretwell**  
for the Mail Tribune

Songwriter Scott Calamar can't say enough good things about his band mates.

When Wine Without Reason came together in the spring of 2010, it had been more than 30 years since his last band broke up. He wrote about 200 songs during those years, recording them for posterity in his home studio. It took sharing them with other musicians and polishing his chops to bring the music to its full breadth and maturity.

At the core of the band is vocalist, guitarist and keyboard player Calamar and brothers Kevin and Bruce McKern on drums and bass, respectively. Longtime fixtures in Southern Oregon music, the McKerns bring more than just a rock-solid rhythm section to Calamar's songs. They play the songs from the inside out, putting significant effort into playing to the subtle nuances in the material. The drumming gives a textured depth to the band, while bass lines periodically leap out into the foreground — leading the band into the songs' transitions with authority.

Calamar, a native of Yonkers, N.Y., headed a band called Smatter during his college years in New London, Conn. The band grew out of a chance encounter when Calamar spotted a kid in his dorm walking down the hall carrying a guitar and a reel-to-reel, multitrack tape recorder. Smatter had a lot of fun and enjoyed local success. Calamar points out — with a laugh — that in 1977 they "opened for a band that had opened for Boston."

After college, the band tried to reconvene in California. It never quite got off the ground, and the members went their separate ways. Calamar went into the publishing business, doing book design and layout work — all the while continuing to hone his songwriting skills.

In 2007, his three fellow Smatter band mates flew to Oregon and held a 30-year band reunion at Calamar's place in Ashland. They jammed in his studio, dusted off their best songs and felt a little bit of the old magic for the first time in years. The experience inexorably started Calamar down a path toward live performance.

He saw so much live music in the area that the lack of a consolidated website dedicated to listing venues and their live music bothered him, so he started [www.ashlandlivemusic.com](http://www.ashlandlivemusic.com). He's continued to maintain the site as a labor of love.

Wine Without Reason formed while Smatter's drummer was visiting, and Calamar booked the group to play a two-hour slot one weekend at Lithia Artisans Market. They were joined by guitarist Joe Diehl, a prolific player who'd worked with many local, high-profile acts — Craig Wright, David Pinsky and the Annie Mac band, among them.

Diehl brought Kevin McKern to the group, who brought his brother Bruce McKern, and soon the band had a name and some good gigs. They decided to make a record in 2012. "First Vintage," produced by Calamar and Kevin McKern, is made up entirely of Calamar's original songs. Some of them were written 30 years ago, and some were written specifically for the band and the record.

Calamar is quick to point out that he considers himself "the amateur of the group" when it comes to his instrumental and live performances. What he means, simply, is that the other members of the band are longtime pros — highly sought after as sidemen and instrumentalists. Calamar, on the other hand, sees himself first and foremost as a songwriter. He says that he's learned a lot about performance over the past 21/2 years of playing gigs with the band.

One of the most important lessons has been how to make mistakes like a pro. When you screw up, he says, don't get flustered "I just keep going. Beyond simply providing a vehicle for bringing his songs to the public, the band has come to inform his material — to give it a specific sound derived from the members' interaction. That sound is beginning a new phase of its evolution with the recent addition of pedal-steel player Fred Epping.

Epping grew up in Southern California playing bluegrass. After moving to New Mexico, then Colorado, he switched to playing acoustic country and folk. He later made the move to electric country music, playing lead guitar and pedal steel.

When Diehl left Southern Oregon in 2012, the band played as a trio for much of the past year.

With Epping in the mix, Wine Without Reason is headed back into the studio to record a new album the band hopes to release this fall.

Wine Without Reason will play from 8 to 11 p.m. Wednesday, May 22, at The Wild Goose, 2365 Ashland St., Ashland, and at 9 p.m. Friday, June 7, at Club 66, 1951 Ashland St., Ashland.

Jef Fretwell is a musician and freelance writer living in Ashland. Reach him at [jefretwell@yahoo.com](mailto:jefretwell@yahoo.com).

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