

The Tumbling Tumbleweeds roll in with Old West style



> COURTESY PHOTO

The Tumbling Tumbleweeds will channel the Old West at the Coffee Gallery Backstage.

preview >

THE TUMBLING TUMBLEWEEDS

> **When:** 2 p.m. today
> **Where:** Coffee Gallery Backstage, 2029 Lake Ave., Altadena
> **Cost:** \$15
> **Information** (626) 398-7917, www.coffeegallery.com, www.thetumblingtumbleweeds.com

BY MICHELLE J. MILLS
> STAFF WRITER

Smooth-as-silk harmonies and a jangling guitar mean The Tumbling Tumbleweeds are in the house.

The quartet — director and baritone Robert Wolfskill, baritone Cade Parenti,

tenor Chris Acuff and R.J. Mills on guitar and additional vocals — strives to bring the entertainment of the Old West to today's audiences.

"It's something I've always wanted to do for years and years because I love the Sons of the Pioneers, the group that we model ourselves after," Wolfskill said. "It was just a question of finding the right guys to do it with."

Wolfskill met Parenti and Acuff doing musical theater with the Downey Civic Light Opera. He discovered Mills noodling on guitar at Starbucks. The four clicked and now perform regularly at the Gene Autry Museum in Los Angeles, as well as at clubs, coffee houses, festivals, charity events and other venues.

Although Wolfskill and Mills write music, the group has not yet added original songs to the repertoire.

"My plan from the beginning was to learn this genre, to learn this style and ... to get so well-crafted that, when we

got to the point where we were writing our own songs, we would be able to write them with that same feel," Wolfskill said.

Currently, they select material rich with story content that was previously recorded by the Sons of the Pioneers. However, some of the song lyrics have been tamed or changed because what was acceptable in the past is not necessarily politically correct today.

"Our mission is to bring the culture and the heritage and the history of the west and western music to modern day," Wolfskill said.

To achieve this, the quartet offers a full performance, including choreography and humor.

"We've got some singing and we've got some schtick, too, like jokes, stories, making fun of certain people like me," Acuff said.

"It's very family friendly," Wolfskill said. "The whole idea is to get the kids interested in what we're doing. Children of all ages."

The Tumbleweeds complete the act by dressing as '50s-era cowboys.

"That's the genre, the silver screen, the Golden Age, Gene Autry, Roy Rodgers," Wolfskill said. "One of my friends who saw us on video said we looked like a movie brought to life."

Group members search the Internet for just the right shirts, shop at western wear stores and on vintage Web sites. They also go to the local mall for Levi jeans.

The Western Music Association has offered the group opportunities to network with like-minded musicians and fans, get advice, and attend jam sessions and shows.

"The Western Music Association is an important part of who we are and what we've become," Wolfskill said. "Their mission is very much in line with ours," to keep western music vital in America and around the world.

Wolfskill lives in Sierra Madre and works in administration at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. Growing up, he sang with the Los Angeles Children's Opera and was a dance major at East Los Angeles College, specializing in ballet. He likes horseback riding.

Hollywood resident Acuff has a master's degree in music from the University of Mississippi. He works part-time at Wells Fargo Bank and also teaches eighth grade. He keeps busy with musical theater and an occasional third job, cleaning Federal Express dropboxes.

Parenti lives in Long Beach and is a container space salesman for Hawaiian Express. He has sung since fifth grade

and also plays a collection of brass instruments. He spends his free time playing sports and hanging out with his family and his fiancée, Robin Cook.

Mills, who has recently moved to Laguna Hills, grew up surrounded by music. His mother was a classically trained singer and his father was a pianist. Today, he plays guitar, mandolin, piano, violin, cello, hammer dulcimer, Japanese flute, saxophone, harmonica, timpani, xylophone and an assortment of other instruments. Mills is planning to conquer koto next.

"I think learning jazz in high school really helped me hone in the music we do because it's very simple, like jazz," Mills said. "The western music we do is very influenced by swing, and learning that over time helped me train my ear."

After The Tumbling Tumbleweeds' performance today at the Coffee Gallery Backstage in Altadena, the group will head to the Western Music Festival in Albuquerque, N.M. They are scheduled to do an Dec. 8 on-air tribute to Gene Autry during "Tied to the Tracks" with Larry Wines on KCSN-FM (88.5), from 6-10 a.m. (visit <http://kcsn.org/programs/tiedtothetracks.html>).

Their self-released CD, "The Tumbling Tumbleweeds," is sold at the group's shows and on its Web site, www.thetumblingtumbleweeds.com. But the best way to enjoy this group is to experience them live.

"We should say that it is our obligation to corn-feed our audiences; yes it's corny, and unapologetically corny at times," Wolfskill said. "People will have fun at our show. It will take them back and give them a sense of nostalgia."

LINER NOTES:

Busy Fingers

Baldwin Piano's My Little Baldwin Club is a Web site that features an online piano lesson plan geared to preschool-age children. There are step-by-step lessons, a parents' resource center and a photo gallery. Visit www.gibson.com/mylittlebaldwin/default.html.

Wedding Strings

Guitarist and arranger Mark Magnuson has released "Acoustic Wedding" (\$15), a CD with 20 ceremony classics played with simple arrangements. Brides-to-be can also download individual selections (\$1 each), obtain sheet music (\$4 per song), get wedding music planning tips and more. Visit www.acousticwedding.com.

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