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Wise blood

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Wovenhand works a supernatural naturalism -- and weaves a Denver charm

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The only real city within a 1,000-mile radius, Denver perches a full mile above sea level, a windswept plateau superficially blanketed by strip malls, widget manufacturers, and convention centers. Bereft of both cosmopolitan peerage and any truly cohesive sense of cultural identity, the loneliness of the native Denverite is pervasive, haunted, and misunderstood, but not wholly undersung. For within the discomfited bosom of the Centennial State, an entire subgenre of music has continued to flourish — attracting devotees from far beyond the state line.

At the forefront of the Denver sound, even before there was such a term, has been David Eugene Edwards. Formerly a member of the Denver Gentlemen — as was fellow standard-bearer, Slim Cessna — Edwards' most well-known band, 16 Horsepower, had all the requisite qualities characteristic of the Denver sound: conviction, intensity, and an uncompromising spiritualism that manifested itself in fire-and-brimstone lyricism, American Gothic instrumentation, and the feverish denunciations of a traveling preacher man. It is difficult to speak of Edwards without the specter of 16 Horsepower looming large behind the context, but Edwards' current band Wovenhand, an entity in progress since 2001, has finally broken away from the tyranny of the past to fully inhabit its own potential with a new album: *Ten Stones* (Sounds Familyre, 2008).

Ten Stones is as elemental an album as Edwards and present company have ever crafted. From the rock-solid, faith-shaken lament "Not One Stone" to the north wind-inhabited "Kicking Bird" to the curiously moving cover of Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Corcovado (Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars)," which sounds as if it had been recorded underwater, almost every song on the album corresponds intriguingly with a companion force of nature. One of the album's particular surprises, the druggy rocker "White Knuckle Grip," feels like the rising tension of clouds gathering before a particularly fierce Colorado thunderstorm — the kind that splits the sky in two and harks back to the great flood that drowned the world. The album showcases the metamorphosis of the band as a whole from solo side project into a tightly knit collaborative, drawing inspiration from the impassioned religious fervor for the supernatural that characterizes much of the Denver sound, and from a greater reverence for the immutable power of the strictly natural, and of the music that lies buried at the heart of both.

Peter van Laerhoven, Wovenhand's lead guitarist since 2005, especially comes into his own on *Ten Stones*. Like a spirited horse finally allowed his head, he rises to the challenge — penning two of the disc's songs, most notably the aforementioned "Kicking Bird" — and smoothly lending earthy heft to the otherworldly divergences of bandmate Edwards. Stripped of many of the alt-Americana bells and whistles of Edwards' earlier music, this strong guitar base helps anchor the tunes in a thoroughly modern context, without diminishing the ageless quality of their emotional weight. And while a driven, revival-meeting furor was essential to the development of the original Denver sound, this willingness to encompass other forms of reverence has become its new watchword. Call it a tempering process, or simply call it maturation. The refined blade of Wovenhand may have been forged in the youthful fires of what was once 16 Horsepower, but with a steel all its own, it cuts straight to the bone.

WOVENHAND

Tues/20, 9 p.m., \$12

Bottom of the Hill

1233 17th St., SF

www.bottomofthehill.com ^[1]

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Look homeward, Denverite
Photo by Gary Issacs

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