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The great musical frontier

Banjo Bones has grown up from a solo roots project into a Wild West band

By [Janelle Bitker](#)
janelleb@newsreview.com

This article was published on [05.11.17](#).

The fact that Pepe Espada grew up in Puerto Rico heavily factors into his music—though not in the way you might expect.

"When you're surrounded by water, this concept of pioneering and the Great American West is very foreign," he says. "You only see it in movies."

If anything, Espada's fascination with the American frontier has only increased with age. It forms a thematic base for his second full-length album as Banjo Bones, *Cowboy Dreams*.

For the past couple of years, Espada has been using the moniker across Sacramento venues. It morphed from an initial "aesthetic concept" to a stage name and now, for the first time, a band. At the record release show on Thursday, May 11, at Blue Lamp, Banjo Bones will consist of singer-songwriter Espada as well as Giorgi Khokhobashvili on violin, Ron Smit on bass and Steve Guest on drums.

"I've always joked that I wanted to be the worst musician in my own band, and that's happened," Espada says, laughing.

Forming a band for Banjo Bones wasn't always the plan, but now that it's happened, Espada couldn't be more thrilled. In a sense, Banjo Bones presents a major comeback opportunity for Espada, who played guitar in the Washington, D.C., post-punk band Samsara in the early '90s before walking away in 1996, sored by the music industry. In 2011, he moved to Sacramento and started tinkering with his Banjo Bones concept.

"I didn't have a master plan initially," he says. "I was very hesitant to come back out."

One evening, he walked into Blue Lamp for open-mic night and never looked back.

Banjo Bones' debut full-length album, 2015's *The Place of Dead Roads*, sounds like a prime soundtrack for season two of *True Detective* with gritty, sparse songs sung like a grizzled veteran relaying war stories in a seedy bar. The darkness remains with *Cowboy Dreams*, but there's a more defined, Wild West-influenced sound ready for a blazing hot desert. Still, Espada doesn't fixate too closely on any particular genre, instead incorporating elements of bluegrass, folk and blues throughout the 10 songs.

He shows the most growth, though, with his vocals. While the gruff rawness works on *The Place of Dead Roads*, *Cowboy Dreams* demonstrates more of Espada's range. Sure enough, he's been working with a vocal coach.

"I'm trying to find my true voice," he says.

More than anything else, Banjo Bones tells stories, and they're meaty. *Cowboy Dreams'* opener, "Tell Him Why," seems like a jaunty number at first, but it doubles as a sharp critique of the United States' immigration policies. Another, "The Rodeo Clown," draws a parallel between the life of a rodeo clown and a struggling musician, punctuated by moody guitar. Certainly, Espada chose Banjo Bones' tagline of "The Dark Side of Americana" for a reason, but *Cowboy Dreams* does offer rare uplifting moments in the title track.

Despite the gloom on display in his songs, Espada actually feels good about his prospects.

"It's really kind of peculiar because I'm personally a happy-go-lucky person," he says. "You'd never associate my music with my personality, but I guess it's a yin-yang effect."

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Banjo Bones conjures a Wild West train by playing its soundtrack. PHOTO BY ADAM EMELIO

Catch Banjo Bones at 8 p.m. Thursday, May 11, at Blue Lamp, 1400 Alhambra Boulevard. There is no cover. More at www.facebook.com/BanjoBones.

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