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Celtic music duo uses American influences

By Will Blanchard Globe Staff Writer

MIAMI, Okla. — Martin McCormack and Brian FitzGerald place their duo Switchback's musical thesis on the performance of both traditional "Celtic soul" and "American roots," but according to the group, the differences are few.

"There's a direct lineage between Irish and Americana," McCormack said. "Americana has its roots in Celtic music and really encompasses the traditions for us."

Switchback plans to perform a collection of songs from their more traditional repertoire at the Coleman Theatre on Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

"For the Coleman, we will be leaning more towards the traditional," McCormack said. "People in this area may not get to hear that as much, but they'll feel right at home with it."

McCormack and FitzGerald have been playing together for over two decades. They met in Chicago, where they formed the traditionally influenced rock group the Wailin' Banshees. The Banshees were the chrysalis of their current duo which would officially form in 1993.

Since then, Switchback has gone on to play all over the United States, Europe and Canada. They were recently named the top duo for festivals, concerts and pubs throughout the United States, Ireland, the European Union and the United Kingdom by the Irish Music Association, an entity that promotes Irish music across the country.

"Switchback is an incredible duo," Bob Reeder, director of the IMA said. "They sound more like a full group even when they're playing as a duo, than most full bands do."

The group attributes their sound to several of their greatest influences, including Irish acts the Clancy Brothers, the Corries and the Chieftains, as well as American artists like Joe Ely, the Band and Wilco. FitzGerald says although some may think their influences are an unconventional blend, "country" music can take on a universal definition.

"In Ireland, one of their favorite performers is Johnny Cash," he said. "They love American music because it's traditional with all these twists and turns. Stylistically it's really all over the map."

Saturday night's show at the Coleman, however, will bring the primitive to an area that's plenty versed in those stylistic twists and turns.

"It has almost a tribal feel to it," McCormack said. "Something that people will feel a sense of coming home to. That's the nice thing about Irish music, it's one of these forms that's felt as much as heard. You feel it on the level of your spirit."