

Roger & Leo Eilts – 3 Trails West

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Here we are at the national convention of the Western Music Association in Albuquerque. It's time for the annual awards presentation, including the Crescendo Award which is presented to the top up-and-coming western musical group of the past year. And the winner is...3 Trails West, from Kansas! This is today's Kansas Profile.

Leo and Roger Eilts are the founders of the singing group 3 Trails West. These two brothers have deep roots in rural Kansas, having grown up on a farm south of Hays in the Walnut Valley region of central Kansas.

The boys had a truly rural lifestyle growing up. As did many boys, Leo had a paper route, but since a bicycle doesn't work very well on sand roads, he sometimes delivered his newspapers on horseback!

The boys also had a musical lifestyle growing up. "Our mother was our music teacher," Roger said. "She taught music at school during the week, played in polka bands on weekends, and was the church organist on Sunday morning." On family trips, the family would sing. "Mom taught us to harmonize, I suppose to keep us from fighting," Leo said.

They also loved the old-time cowboy music by groups such as the Sons of the Pioneers. "We would put on a stack of their 33 1/3 LPs on the record player and fall asleep to the music," Roger said. "Then the next night, we would turn them over and do it again."

Leo went to Wichita State and learned to play folk music. After years of travelling, he settled in Kansas City and found he enjoyed playing bluegrass music as well.

Roger went to Bethany College and studied vocal music. He eventually rejoined brother Leo in Kansas City where he and his brother have business careers today. They also continue to love making music.

Leo and Roger formed a music group called Total Strangers which played for years in the Kansas City area. Then they organized another progressive bluegrass group called Spontaneous Combustion which played for 21 seasons. These bands had a lot of success, but in fall 2006, one of their members was leaving the band.

"We were driving back from our last show in southwest Kansas and thinking, 'What should we do next?'" Roger said. "After we thought about it, we knew this: We loved the old-time cowboy music." They decided to try to put together such a group. "We made a few calls and had two guys lined up (to join us) by the time we got back to Kansas City," Roger said.

Ultimately, they put together the cowboy band now known as 3 Trails West, so named because the Kansas City area was the departure point for three historic western routes: The Santa Fe, California, and Oregon Trails.

3 Trails West now consists of Roger Eilts on rhythm guitar and lead and harmony vocals, Leo Eilts on upright bass and harmony vocals, and Jim Winters on guitar and lead vocals, plus instrumental musicians Bill Dye, Marvin Gruenbaum, and Ken Lovern. "These guys are amazing talents," Leo said.

3 Trails West is a cowboy band, playing western swing, classic cowboy music, and music of the silver screen. This music brings them back to their roots. Not only are their harmonies remarkable, the repartee between group members makes for a fun and entertaining performance. The band has been a top five finalist for western swing album and group of the year. At the international awards ceremony in 2011, the Western Music Association presented its Crescendo Award to 3 Trails West.

That's a remarkable accomplishment for a couple of guys who grew up near the rural community of Rush Center, population 174 people. Now, that's rural. For more information, go to www.3trailswest.com.

It's time to leave the international awards ceremony of the Western Music Association, where 3 Trails West has been recognized as the most promising performing group of the previous year. We commend Leo and Roger Eilts, Jim Winter, Bill Dye, Marvin Gruenbaum, and Ken Lovern for making a difference with classic cowboy music. I hope their music career will keep rising like a crescendo.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.