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The Po' Ramblin' Boys will perform on Friday, Feb. 14, at 8 p.m. at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook.

THE OZARKS TO GRACE OLD SAYBROOK

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By Lisa Reisman

OLD SAYBROOK — They don't have superstar back stories or time with big name acts on their resumes. Just a passion for the music and a knack for delivering it in the old time way.

That's what initially drew celebrated fiddler Laura Orshaw to the Po' Ramblin Boys, who will make their first visit to The Kate on Friday, Feb. 14.

"The band takes aspects of traditional bluegrass and makes something new out of it," said Orshaw who, while performing and recording with the Boys for the past several years when her schedule allowed, officially became the fifth member of the group in January.

The group got its start in 2014. C.J. Lewandowski was contentedly working his day job at Sevierville, Tennessee's Ole Smoky Mountain Distillery, enlightening tourists on the finer points of moonshine and mountain music.

A mandolin player and singer influenced by seminal bluegrass figures Dub Crouch and Norman Ford in the fertile Ozark bluegrass community of his native



The Po' Ramblin' Boys with the celebrated fiddler Laura Orshaw who officially joined the band this past January.

Missouri, he'd fill in from time to time when a hired act fell through.

Then the distillery approached him about forming a band.

He recruited banjo player Jerome Brown, who was doing welding work at the time, and guitarist Josh Rinkel, who was running a sign company. Bassist Jasper Lorentzen was working in the tasting room at the distillery.

Over the next year and a half, the four friends played between five to 10 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week, showcasing bluegrass material from the Ozark region and honing their hard-edged, hard-driving style of traditional bluegrass.

"We were basically being paid to practice at our day jobs," Lewandowski told the Bluegrass Situation.

Meanwhile, word was spreading about their honky-tonk bluegrass sound, as Lewandowski has described it. That acclaim led to offers to play everywhere from Alberta, Canada to Europe, where, in 2015, they would tour Germany, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Switzerland.

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PO' BOYS

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After releasing their first album, "Back to the Mountains," then a Gospel album, "God's Love is So Divine," they played in 46 states, performing their music on rural bluegrass festival stages, as well as rock clubs and jazz festivals.

"Every so often a band comes around that knocks everybody's socks off and gets people talking," famed Americana songsmith Jim Lauderdale said around that time. "I'd bet good money that you're gonna really enjoy them, but I don't want to take your money. Use it to listen to the Po' Ramblin' Boys. I'm putting my money on them."

Evidently, his bet paid off. In 2018 the group took home the International Bluegrass Music Association's *Emerging Artist of the Year* award. Not long afterward, they signed with *Rounder Records*, the home of, among others, bluegrass



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The Po' Ramblin Boys were nominated for a Grammy nomination this past November.

queen Alison Krauss & Union Station and singer-songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter.

Their third album, "Toil, Tears and Trouble," a "showcase of sharp instrumentation and traditional harmonies," according to theboot.com, set their popularity soaring and led to an invite to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville in October 2019.

"They didn't just play the

Grand Ole Opry," as Scott Reynolds of wdrb.com reported. "They owned it with a thunderous standing ovation," an unheard-of feat for first-timers.

If making history on country's greatest stage wasn't on the band's radar, neither was the recent Grammy nomination of "Toil, Tears and Trouble" for Best Bluegrass Album of the Year this past November.

"We did our first album on Rounder and we thought maybe in our second or third release, we'd get nominated, but we did not expect this at all," Orshaw said.

In addition to going to the parties and walking the red carpet at the Jan. 26 awards ceremony in Los Angeles, "it was inspiring and motivating to be around the innovators in all these types of music," she said.

For Lewandowski, all the accolades are nice, but what matters most is the music.

The masters of bluegrass "played for the love of the music, not the fame," he said. "That's exactly what The Po' Ramblin' Boys do, as well."

► The Po' Ramblin' Boys will perform on Friday, Feb. 14 at 8 p.m. at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit www.katharinehepburn-theater.org or call 1-800-503-1286.