

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1994



Photos for the Tribune by Tim Brylle

Slavek Hanzlik (top), a Czechoslovakian native, performs at Mama Java's Coffee House in Evanston. Banjoist Tuey

Connell (above, from left), Hanzlik and bassist Brett Simons dazzle the crowd with their new acoustic sound.

Beyond blue grass

Versatile Hanzlik Trio mixes rock, jazz, Latin with touch of finesse

By David Duckman
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Anyone looking in the window of Mama Java's Coffee House in Evanston on Tuesday night would have seen a string band on stage, and because the instruments were guitar, banjo and bass, the assumption might have been that the evening's entertainment was hillbilly music. Inside, however, listeners were being treated to a set of original, modern music by the Slavek Hanzlik Trio.

Led by guitarist Slavek Hanzlik, the trio plays an obscure but vital style known as new acoustic music, which could be considered bluegrass music's radical left-wing cousin. Practitioners of this style combine bluegrass instrumentation and techniques with jazz, rock, Latin or anything else that seems to fit, and when it is performed by musicians of Hanzlik's caliber, the re-

sults can be spellbinding.

His technique is consistently fluid, and his tone retains a silky, shimmering quality, whether he is winding around a gentle ballad like "Irwin Road" or galloping through a traditional bluegrass standard like "Bill Cheatham."

His background is not that of the typical bluegrass picker. A native of Prague, he became a political refugee in 1982 when he fled Czechoslovakia and settled in Winnipeg. In 1991, the Chicago-based Flying Fish label released his first CD, "Spring in the Old

Country," and while visiting the record company, Hanzlik found Chicago, and its musicians, to his liking. He ultimately hired local banjoist Tuey Connell and Chicago bassist Brett Simons to complete his trio.

They are a flexible group, able to mix bluegrass swagger with jazz sophistication.

Connell, himself a leader of a Latin-jazz sextet, has absorbed the sounds of modern players such as Bela Fleck and Tony Trischka, but has developed a personal vocabulary of his own, which was evident in his skittering solo on Charlie Parker's "Now's the Time."

Simons, who is adept at both acoustic and electric bass, balances be-

tween being the group's anchor and its third solo voice, often carving a counter-melody behind the lead instruments.

As an ensemble, they produce a very broad, spacious sound that is much larger than one would imagine a trio of these instruments could create. At the same time, they are flexible enough that the group texture can shift in an instant from a sparse, gossamer thread to a bold, chugging juggernaut.

This trio is a unique, and welcome, entity on the Chicago music scene.

The Slavek Hanzlik Trio, along with several other bluegrass players, will appear at 9 p.m. Thursday at Martini McGlynn's, 6306 N. Western Ave. Phone 764-2110.

Bluegrass