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Pulling in the Trout at West Chester U

By Gene D'Alessandro
For The Inquirer

West Chester University's John Rhein has been after Trout Fishing in America for years.

The father of a 10-year-old daughter - and director of the university's office of cultural and community affairs - got so jazzed after hearing the zany duo on Kids Corner on WXPN (88.5 FM) that he was determined to book the pair at the university.

Seeing the band's promotional booth at trade shows year after year, he hobnobbed with booking agents and managers trying to secure a concert date. But scheduling conflicts continued to keep the Trouts out of West Chester.

Not any more, Trout-sters . . .

After stalking the Trouts for years, Rhein finally landed his fish:

The acoustic folk-rock duo will make its West Chester University debut Saturday as part of school's Visiting Artist Series. They will play two shows in the Emilie K. Asplundh Concert Hall.

"A Trout show is all over the place - both adults and kids have a good time," Rhein said. "It's the kind of programming that is just perfect since they appeal on on different levels."

More family music than kids' music in their appeal, the wily performers - vocalist/guitarist Ezra Idlet and vocalist/bassist Keith Grimwood - alternate between folk-rock and kids' genres. They throw the musical kitchen sink into their songs: folk, reggae, Cajun, blues, tango, rap and comedy routines.

Their group name - Trout Fishing in America - is taken from Richard Brautigan's abstract novella of the 1960s, and pays homage to the author's unusual way of looking at reality.

Like Brautigan, "they look at things in a different way," said Trouts manager Dick Renko. "I find that's the way artists are - they perceive things differently."

The guys certainly look different. Guitarist Idlet stands 6 feet, 9 inches and bassist Grimwood 5 feet, 5 1/2 inches. Like their look, their live shows are fantastic and off-beat.

The Trouts may invite listeners to mess up one another's hair on "My Hair Had a Party Last Night" or they will play Simon on "Simon Says," where they do their best to confuse the audience.

Combining solid musicianship - before Trout Fishing, Grimwood played with the Houston Symphony - with silly, quirky and sometimes serious tunes, the Trout boys work to entertain "kids" of every age.



Trout Fishing In America is made up of Ezra Idlet (left) and Keith Grimwood. They are playing two shows this Saturday on campus.

Whether it's the teen tune "My Pants Fell Down" or the gross "Alien in My Nose," Idlet and Grimwood can perform from the point of view of a 6-year-old or charm older folks with folksy love songs.

Of the adult tunes, one critic wrote: "Think Paul Simon playing Randy Newman with a bit of Smothers Brothers tossing the bowling pins."

"They're so clever, the songs are so good . . . they appeal on many different levels," Rhein said.

The Trouts write most of their songs together and release the music on their own label, Trout Records. Their songs have garnered National Indie Awards, Parents Choice Gold Awards, American Library Awards and three Grammy nominations.

"They always get the crowd going," said Emily Moody, performing arts coordinator at Longwood Gardens, where the Trouts have played annually since 1994. (The boys will be back at Longwood on June 28.)

"We joke around that there's a kiddie mosh pit in front of the stage," Moody said. "It just reflects the type of energy the group gives off."

Moody said the parents always sing along and do all the crazy actions that the kids are supposed to do.

Trout Fishing in America performs about 100 shows a year, Renko said. They offer three concert programs:

- (1) a fast-paced, participatory show for children ages kindergarten through sixth grades;
- (2) a family show for everyone, toddlers to grand parents (that's the West Chester engagement);
- (3) a full pop/rock concert for adults, full of love songs and break-up songs.

"From the first note, there is a clear communication with the audience that's beyond just the performing of a song, and that communication goes into the patter between songs," Renko said. "That kind of participation is what makes it great art."

Whether it's high-brow or low - adults or kids - John Rhein expects WCU's 1,200-seat Asplundh Concert Hall to be drowning in Trout music Saturday.

Get those chest-waders ready, anglers. It's Trout time.