

Yonder Grows Up

Colorado neo-bluegrassers evolve and continue pushing the boundaries of acoustic music

By Ryan Heinsius

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Bluegrass ambassadors: Colorado's Yonder Mountain String Band. From left, banjo player Dave Johnston, guitarist Adam Aijala, mandolinist Jeff Austin and bassist Ben Kaufmann. All photos by Tobin Voggeser, courtesy of Shore Fire Media.

Bluegrass has never been a mainstream type of music. Well, I guess there was that brief flirtation pop culture had with Flatt and Scruggs' "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" and "The Beverly Hillbillies." And then there was the eternally creepy inbred banjo kid from "Deliverance," and more recently the "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou" wave a decade ago. But, for 12 years a young foursome from Colorado has been making their own brand of bluegrass-influenced acoustic music that has bridged the huge gap between traditional styles and more progressively oriented jam band music.

Yonder Mountain String Band has become an institution in American live music, but has also managed to make those high lonesome bluegrass sounds accessible to otherwise non-bluegrass audiences. Routinely packing amphitheaters and large venues on their always-exhausting touring schedule, Yonder's appeal has stretched to all facets of the modern American music listener.

I had the pleasure of interviewing mandolinist/vocalist Jeff Austin recently and our conversation delved into the reasons that Yonder has managed to successfully cross-pollinate musical genres, why they don't consider themselves bluegrass, the possible end of the album era, and why Lady Gaga totally rocks.

See Yonder Mountain String Band at Pine Mountain Amphitheater Fri, Aug 13. Gates open at 7:30 p.m. and the show starts at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$23 in advance and \$28 at the door. Pine Mountain is located at the Ft. Tuthill County Fairgrounds, exit 337 off I-17. For more info, see www.yondermountain.com and www.pmamp.com, or call 774-0899.

Ryan Heinsius: You guys are on a bit of a break right now, right?

Jeff Austin: Well, you know, we had a new little addition to our Yonder family. Our banjo player Dave (Johnston) and his wife had a baby about two and a half months ago. Oh my God, I'll tell you what, he looks just like Dave. He is so sweet. He's just a great little guy. He's going to be bright and he's got that look in his eyes. He's two and a half months old and curious about everything. It's pretty cool. We've been spreading out our travels this summer; to see what new patterns we can get into because we have to tour, we want to tour, and we love it. And it's also the realization that life is kind of moving and it's nice to see how things can be restructured and get creative with it.

Did I hear correctly that you guys played with Ralph Stanley the other night?

We were invited to be the house band at the Lincoln Center for the Blind Boys of Alabama. We played the Alice Tully Hall in New York City at Lincoln Center. Yeah, it was amazing. It was incredible. We were the house band throughout the night. What it was is that the Blind Boys did a week residency and one night the theme was kind of rock; another night the theme was kind of gospel, country, bluegrass; and then another night I think it was improv New Orleans kind of flavor. The rock night Yo La Tengo was the house band, and then we got to be the house band which meant they had these guests, you know, Ray Benson from Asleep at the Wheel, and Allison Moorer, and Ralph Stanley was there, and we got to do our first interaction and play music with Ralph Stanley, which was—he looked at me and nodded for me to take a mandolin solo and it's a moment I won't forget.

Tell me a little bit about the band's newest album, *The Show*. It seems to be a real return to the live sound of the band rather than the experimentation of the last album.

That's what we're going for. That's what we keep trying to get out of a record these days, is live. And then experimenting with things; adding things like drums ... the record's been out for a while now. It's been out for over a year I think, or almost a year. It's not even new, it's been out for a long time and it's—s**t, I've got to be honest, we finished making it a year before it came

out so I'm years removed from that record. I'm onto the thoughts of what the next thing can be.

And what is that next thing?

To be completely honest with you, I'm kind of not—we're not really focused on making another record right now. It's a medium that needs to become more and more creative. The thought of making the record, spending tens of thousands of dollars on it and putting it out—it just doesn't seem to make sense anymore. I mean, look at the top-selling record of a week from, like, Lady Gaga. It's only selling like 20,000 copies and for a band like us to print 10,000, 20,000 copies, God knows when we're ever going to sell that many records. That's kind of where we are right now is thinking what new cool, creative, proactive way can we get our music out there? Because it's not that we want to stop making records, but we need to become creative. That's where we are right now is thinking what's the next cool idea we can come up with.

Sure. Then what's your opinion of the music industry if the album format is kind of dying?

(Laughs) We don't have that kind of time! The music industry? Which one, live or recorded? Which one is dying a faster death? Vinyl; put it out on vinyl and it'll actually sell. We printed a show on vinyl and sold out of that as quick as can be. Actually, what we're kind of revisiting is putting out earlier records of ours on vinyl as well.

Well yeah, vinyl sales in the last few years have increased ...

Three hundred, 400 percent. That's not hard because they weren't making vinyl for a long time. Unless you were an emo-core band or some serious underground hardcore death metal pressing seven inches and 12-inch singles or EPs, that wasn't even out there, music wasn't even being pressed on vinyl. I don't know what it is. I think for too long it was just one thing and it settled in on that. And, you know, the digital age is—hell, some of my best friends download music illegally or this or that. I do not. I really do not. I purchase my music because I think it's a karmic thing. You can't be ripping off music. I love musicians who are bitchin', "Oh man, people are downloading our songs illegally." Oh yeah, well give me your iPod. How much of this music did you buy? I try to keep my conscience *clean*. I did have an iPod that did have music I did not purchase on there and the thing s**t the bed. So I was like, "All right, there it is. That's the sign I needed. I'm done. I get it. Sorry."

I interviewed Ben (Kaufmann, bass) a few years ago and it really surprised me that the four of you are from such different backgrounds, and none of you really grew up with bluegrass.

None of us grew up with it. None of us grew up in a household where it was like, "Hey kids, let's gather 'round the old knittin' circle and play some bluegrass." None of us grew up with that. Pop music and metal—that is what I grew up on; and the Grateful Dead and Phish.

How does a band come together, gel like you guys have and stick together despite being so different personally?

First of all, I don't think we play bluegrass. I gave up the idea of us playing bluegrass a long time ago. We tried to be *the best bluegrass band in the world* you know, and it just wasn't who we were. So, I'm never going to play bluegrass as well as the Seldom Scene, or Hot Rize. It's amazing what they do with the music. It's just incredible. And I think when we came to the conclusion of, "Let's not try to be a traditional bluegrass band or this band or that band. Let's just be ourselves," suddenly the doors opened wide. And that's when the crowds got bigger, more people started paying attention. That sort of stuff, when we said, "Let's just be ourselves." I think that's what audiences want to hear. They don't want to hear four guys who didn't grow up with bluegrass stand there and try to play as good as Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys. Let's not try to do that, let's just try to be ourselves, and I think that, because we did come from such diverse backgrounds and stuff like that, that's why, when the process started to happen and we said, "Let's just be ourselves," it was easier for us to dive full force into it. Because it wasn't like, "Oh man, I'm gonna be going against my roots." Those aren't my roots. And as soon as we became honest with that, it really made things easier.

It's obvious people really do appreciate that from you guys because the mainstream bluegrass world isn't necessarily very accessible to mainstream audiences.

No. Well, it can also be very closed. It's like a fraternity that they don't want any more members of sometimes. I mean, we've definitely come across that where we hear, "This isn't bluegrass! They're ruining music." How can you ruin music? That's like a Confucius saying. How can you ruin music. You may not like something, but you can't ruin music. Your tastes may be different. I may not enjoy this, or I may not enjoy that. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have validity to it to somebody.

And it's always those genre-bending bands that make a mark in my mind.

And that's what we wanted to be. We wanted to be our own— basically, if you're thinking of the band as a person—we wanted to be our own person. And really let it; like I said, let it become its own thing.

But it does seem that you have finally gotten the respect of that bluegrass club too now?

A little bit more than we used to and I think it's just because we wore them down. They drank the Kool-Aid one too many times.

But, back to the origins of the band, you didn't even play mando till Dave asked you to join the Bluegrassholes in Illinois.

I had one and kind of noodled with it.

Did you play anything before and how did you take to it so quickly?

I played it a s**tload. I was self-employed—let's put it that way—and I had a lot of time to just be able to play and I did it. And I was also surrounded by it. All my friends and everybody. That's what we did when we hung out, was sing and play bluegrass. That was how we approached our day. "Hey man," everybody else was going to college. "You guys are done with classes, let's play. Let's grab a couple beers and bring 'em home and we'll pick music till 4 in the morning." And then tomorrow at 2 o'clock we'll start all over again. And also being surrounded by the guys who really taught me to be fearless on stage and stuff like that.

With Yonder, it's obvious that everybody has a role and it clicks together really well. It seems really are the energy guy.

I fully accept that role and I take it on. It's very natural to who I am and what I do. So I'm fully accepting of that role. It's so crazy to watch bands and there's no one real leader, but you can tell there's somebody that really could be and they really need to just jump up and do it. It's kind of frustrating to watch. It took a lot. But we are a democracy in our band. Because I might be the guy who talks a lot and does the introductions I get labeled as the leader of the band. It's never like I'm making calls on, we're doing this song, or we're doing that song. I may do the set list most nights, but every night it goes through an editing process. It's not like we're playing only my music. That's the part that I really like is that it makes it accessible to people.

I went and saw Lady Gaga last night and I've got news for you, that woman's f**kin' amazing. And, it's her show. And she runs the show, and she can handle it. And it's amazing because everybody has their roles and she's really good at doing the leadership. So that kind of thing. This isn't Jeff Austin's Yonder Mountain String Band. This is us as a unified force, you know.

Did you really go see Lady Gaga last night? F**k yeah I did! Are you kiddin' me? She was amazing. I tell you, I was telling some people and they were like, "Why are going to see that?" Well, because I like all kinds of music. Because I'm not like, "Oh, I don't listen to rap." Well that's just ignorant. Are you kiddin' me? Have you heard (Jay-Z's) *The Blueprint*? Have you listened to any of Lil Wayne's stuff?

The interview I just did was, "Oh man, that's bad music. That's just terrible?" Well, how can you make music bad? You may not like something, but it still has validity in its creation. And people may say, "Yonder, that's not bluegrass, that's bulls**t." That's OK. And I accept it, but at least it's something. At least we're making music. I got so inspired off that show last night and now I will carry that with me into what I do with Yonder. It will inspire me when I go play the show I'm playing before Phish in Telluride with a couple friends of mine. It's inspiring for me to see all sorts of music; to go see a musical, to go see somebody play classical violin; to go see a hardcore punk; to go see some death metal. These things all affect who I am and what I bring to the stage. I think if you say, "I don't listen to bluegrass." Well man, you must live a real boring life. You're missing out on a lot. I think you might be selling yourself short. You're missing out on a lot. And it was funny, my friends said, "Oh that's awful. Why the hell would you go do that?" Well, 'cause it's gonna be great. She actually sings the show. It's not a pre-recorded tracks.

And she's a really fantastic musician too.

Oh, she's an accomplished musician. She was playing everything. It was incredible.

Well, that's an admirable attitude you've got.

It's not like I was always this open minded—oh man, that's crap. As my mom would say, "Just listen to yourself. Is that right? Is that how you want to be perceived? Are you comfortable feeling that way?" And I was like, "Wow, you're right. I want to listen to everything." Because if you don't listen, you'll never know what you might find that's going to inspire you. It's like, "Oh man, I don't like Lady Gaga." Well, I guarantee you there were points in last night's show where you would stand there and go, "*Damn*. That was awesome. What a powerful and inspiring thing that just was." But if you keep yourself closed to it how are you going to know?

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