

ACOUSTIC BLUE



Missy Zink

Everything Old Is New Again

By Curly Merzbacher

It sometimes surprises folks to learn how well bluegrass grows in New England. From mid-June until early September, you could plot a winding trail through a string of bluegrass festivals that would take you from Connecticut to the Canadian border. Should you take this pilgrimage, you would almost certainly encounter, not once but several times, the band Acoustic Blue. Though their touring isn't limited to New England, this quartet has been and continues to be a mainstay of the region's robust festival circuit.

The group hails from the Berkshire Mountains, and those roots are useful in understanding its sound and style, which bear the marks of both New England and the rural lifestyle of the mountains. It features Corey Zink on mandolin, T.

Shaun Batho on guitar, Larry Neu on banjo, and Bear Acker on bass. All members share vocal duties, with Zink handling the lion's share of lead singing. Although several members had played together in other outfits, Acoustic Blue really took form at a jam during the Basin Bluegrass Festival in Brandon, Vt., in the Summer of 2003. The band started to practice seriously in the Fall of that same year.

Bassist Acker has been performing since the 1960s. Like many musicians of that era, he found his way to bluegrass via the folk music scene. To hear him reminisce about past groups and gigs is to take a trip down the Memory Lane of New England bluegrass. Renowned pickers such as Red Rector and Don Stover

L-R: Bear Acker, Larry Neu, Corey Zink, and T. Shaun Batho.

weren't just influences for Acker; they were friends and mentors.

Zink and Batho grew up together in western Massachusetts. Though a generation younger than Acker, both share a reverence for music from earlier times, albeit with slightly different accents. Ironically, while Zink was falling in love with the classic country music of George Jones and Merle Haggard, his own father and uncles were immersing Batho in the bluegrass canon. Playing music has been a longstanding practice in the Zink family. These days, when he sings Tom T. Hall's tune "Bill Monroe For Breakfast"—a song in which bluegrass is as

much a part of a family's morning routine as Cheerios—Zink says the lyrics might as well be describing weekends at home throughout his childhood.

The band's collective biography is encoded in their set lists, which tend to alternate between staples of 1950-'60s era bluegrass like Flatt & Scruggs "I'd Rather Be Alone" and honky-tonk heartbreakers like "Don't You Ever Get Tired Of Hurting Me?" The common thread that runs through all this material is an emphasis on singing, and not just any singing, but singing with harmony and feeling. The band plays few instrumentals, and it keeps the soloing tight and focused. Vocals are front and center. "We've had that conversation, that the biggest, most important thing is the vocals," says Neu. "If you have good vocals, even a mediocre band will get attention." Acker adds, "Northern bands don't work on their singing as much as they should. They work on hot picking."

That broad-brush characterization does apply to many of the bands that have emerged from New York and New England since the bluegrass revival of the early 1970s. But if we were to turn the calendar back to the years following World War II, we would find a burgeoning northeastern bluegrass scene in which vocals played a prominent role. In those days, the Lilly Brothers were fixtures in Boston clubs, and they exerted a powerful influence on bluegrass and folk musicians in the area. Traces of the Lillys' style—unadorned arrangements and tight, sweet harmonies—can be heard in Acoustic Blue. There's even a touch of it in Zink's mandolin playing, which favors a strummed tremolo reminiscent of Everett Lilly's technique.

Banjo picker Larry Neu could be viewed as the very embodiment of the forces that shaped the early days of New England's bluegrass scene. Like the Lilly Brothers, he hails from West Virginia. Although to this day he considers himself Appalachian to the core, he moved to Rhode Island while still a kid. There, like so many New Englanders before him, he was able to dial in the music of the Blue Ridge by listening at night to the signal of WWVA, West Virginia's powerhouse radio station. So it was then, as he came of age in the Ocean State, Neu could fall asleep to the sounds of the *Wheeling Jamboree* and the *Mac Wiseman Record Shop* radio show. Small wonder that,

when he later took up the banjo, he favored classic bluegrass. "I was kind of a 'banjo snob,' now that I look back at it. At the time, I pretty much only listened to traditional bluegrass music." Although he would eventually go on to incorporate the full range of contemporary technique into his playing, he remains a traditionalist at heart. This is a guy who didn't just study Scruggs-style banjo; he had a picture of the master himself tattooed on his upper arm.

Such proclivities make a natural fit for Acoustic Blue, since the band often seems like a living time capsule from the era of morning music broadcasts, honky-tonks, and gospel revivals. "We try to present ourselves in a classic manner, by wearing matching suits and using just a couple microphones on stage," says Batho. "That goes back to a timeless tradition in bluegrass." Fittingly, the band's brand-new release is entitled *Timeless*. "The cover of our new album has Bear's 1940 pick-up on it, along with the band," adds Batho. "And it's because we feel that the music we play, like that pick-up, has stood the test of time. It's still strong, still running. It's timeless."

It's instructive to contrast this sound with that of the contemporary bluegrass scene in Boston and Portland, Me., where a number of individual players and bands (Darol Anger, Matt Glaser, Crooked Still) have mixed old-time and bluegrass tunes with techniques and themes from swing, Celtic, and even classical music. The resulting blend of ancient modal harmonies with jazz rhythms sounds at once very old and very new. While it's tempting to paint a portrait of New England bluegrass that pits the innovations of coastal hipsters against the traditional leanings of mountain folk like Acoustic Blue, that would be an oversimplification. In truth, the two scenes coexist, one devoted to straight-ahead bluegrass and the other to a more experimental, hybrid approach.

"I've often said there are an awful lot of hillbillies in New England. It's just that they talk different and there's a different climate," says Acker, adding with a wink that the swells in Boston call them "hill-Williams."

Indeed, whether in Boston or the hinterlands, many of the area's local institutions that promote bluegrass remain steadfastly attached to tradition. That's a reality that Acker has reckoned

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with firsthand. "I had one edition of my band that, I couldn't get traditional pickers," he says. "I could get progressive pickers, so I got 'em." But bookings proved hard to come by. "It was like running myself into this corner," he recalls. "So I turned around and I came back and I went straight on the traditional way."

That's fine with bandmate Zink, who sees bluegrass as a place where the simple virtues of what he calls "traditional country"—the music of George Jones, Merle Haggard, Faron Young, and Porter Wagoner—can continue to flourish, now that contemporary country music has largely merged into the pop mainstream. Indeed, he cautions that bluegrass needs to take pains to maintain the qualities that make it distinct. "In my opinion, bluegrass has to be as careful as country music does to not get too far away from the traditional, because it will drive people away, looking for something else."

Perhaps it's not surprising that a man who holds such views has an entire room of his house dedicated to George Jones memorabilia. Yet while it's not hard to hear an echo of "The Possum" in his singing, Zink was never that concerned with copying Jones' vocal technique. "I wasn't really all that excited about his voice," he says. Rather, he wanted to figure out how Jones could get right to the emotional core of every song he sang. "How does this guy take everybody and put them in the palm of his hand by singing emotionally? And I wanted to do that; I wanted to figure that out."

This emotional directness is clearly in the forefront of Zink's concerns as a songwriter as well. His songs, several of which have become part of the band's core repertoire, are often marked by an intense melancholy reminiscent of classic country ballads. "Carved Into A Stone" tells the tale of a widower who longs to turn his memories of his late wife into something as permanent as a tombstone. "Sweet Perfume" concerns a lingering scent—all that's left of a departed lover. These songs don't just sound old; they sound mature. There is a wistful resignation running through them that seems at odds with the youth of their creator.

"He writes like he's 67 years old," says Acker. Oddly enough, Zink seems to have been born with this worldly



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perspective: "Sweet Perfume" is the first song he ever wrote. But lest the band's willingness to explore grown-up themes and its vintage performance style convey a sense of restraint and seriousness, Zink hastens to point out that there is a manic unpredictability to every Acoustic Blue show. "We're crazy. We bounce around on stage and we dance and act like fools sometimes."

"We want to have fun on stage," adds Batho, "Because we know if we're having fun, our audience is having a good time, too."

While this bubbly energy comes off as genuine, in truth, it requires a good deal of choreography. For one thing, the scarcity of microphones requires band members to cluster as they sing harmonies, just as the Lilly Brothers would have done. Then there's the fact that band members trade off on both vocal and soloing duties. On many tunes, Zink and Batho bob and weave around one of the microphones like sparring partners. As Zink finishes a line of lyrics, Batho ducks in with his guitar to add a quick lick. Small wonder that when the band practices, it arrays itself in specific formations. "The hard part is to make it look simple," notes Acker. "Making it look simple" can mean spending hours of rehearsal time on one tune, figuring out who's "doing the kick," how vocal duties will be distributed, and how and where the instrumental breaks will fit in.

Neu summarizes the band's work ethic as follows: "If you want it to be right, to be 'right and tight,' you gotta put the time in, actually." In the end, the band's central article of faith is that its public comes first. "Because at that very moment," explains Batho, "while we're on stage, every person in the audience is essentially our boss."

Every aspect of their performance is geared toward cementing the relationship with the folks out in the seats. No detail is overlooked. To underscore this point, Zink recalls Acker once stopping him as he was about to go out on stage. "He says to me, 'You're not going on stage with those sunglasses on, are you?' I said, 'Well, I was gonna. It's kinda bright up there, you know?' He says, 'You know, when you do that, you're creating a wall between yourself and the audience, a disconnect. They can't make eye contact.' And I thought, 'Here I am working so hard to sing so good so these people will pay



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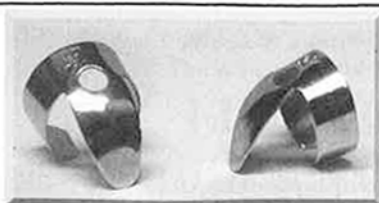


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attention and I'm cutting everything off right there.' It made perfect sense."

Even the band's approach to recording can be seen as just another way of maintaining a personal connection with the listener. Starting with their debut CD in 2006, *Workin' Man*, Acoustic Blue has kept up a steady output of recorded material. While each record has a distinct tone, the output as a whole has remained true to a sound that the band honed by playing in front of live audiences. This is no accident. Acker notes that they have consciously avoided a mistake made by even the most knowledgeable outfits. "They want a hot new release, so they do a CD, and they have guest performers come in." As Acker points out, however, when the performer then tries to tour behind the album's release, now sans renowned guests, audiences are inevitably disappointed by the disparity between the recording and the live performance.

Like so many aspects of Acoustic Blue, its down-to-earth attitude toward recording harkens back to an earlier time, when records were a way to support and expand the audience for live shows, rather than the other way

around. Be that as it may, in this era of cultural niches and file sharing, perhaps such an approach isn't so much anachronistic as it is realistic. It keeps the focus on something that can't be easily packaged, cheapened, or replicated—the spontaneity and intimacy of live performance.

Given this stance, it might seem a contradiction that Acoustic Blue's recent DVD is an explicit attempt by the band to be "caught in the act." True, *Live From The Road* collects 14 songs from several festival appearances, but the disc isn't meant to be a substitute for hearing the band in person. Rather, it's really a keepsake for the faithful, something to tide them over as they wait for the winter snows to melt. For as growing legions of fans know, when Spring comes, they can put the records on the shelf, haul the tarps off their RVs, and head down the road certain that, soon enough, their paths will cross with Acoustic Blue.



Curly Merzbacher is a film maker and writer of subjects related to bluegrass.

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