

Multicolored Music: Greensky Bluegrass

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Photo Courtesy of Greensky Bluegrass Facebook

Whether you're a bigger fan of STS9 than Yonder Mountain String Band or if you prefer to rage Pretty Lights to grooving to The Infamous Stringdusters, it's undeniable that bluegrass is one of the most vibrant parts of the jam band scene.

After an impressive touring season including appearances at the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, Bonnaroo and All Good, Greensky Bluegrass is helping to lead a new generation of bands who are combining jazz, rock, folk and traditional bluegrass into an exciting and innovative new genre.

[[FIND news, downloads and tour dates on Greensky Bluegrass' official website.](#)]

Greensky is known for their lengthy improvisational jams and extended suite-like songs as well as their vivacious live shows. Headstash Magazine spoke to Dobro player Anders Beck in anticipation of the band's upcoming show in Washington, D.C. at a Living Classrooms benefit about their latest release, the longevity of bluegrass and how he got into the unusual instrument.

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Headstash Magazine: How did you get into playing Dobro?

Anders Beck: I started playing Dobro when I was a mediocre guitar player. I started getting into bluegrass and was trying to find a place in the music I really enjoyed listening to. I stumbled upon the Dobro at Telluride Bluegrass festival – one year there was a Dobro workshop.

That year Jerry Douglas and Rob Ickes and really all the great Dobro players were there. I wasn't really familiar with the instrument, but it hit me like a ton of bricks that that was the instrument I was looking for. It's almost like an electric guitar of the acoustic world, which really is what appealed to me.

HM: You have had a very active touring season this year.

What were some highlights?

AB: There have been a ton of highlights *[Laughs]*. We did our first Bonnaroo, which was really awesome. We had a great time playing there – great reception.

I really like being one of the bluegrass bands at music festivals and rock and roll festivals like All Good rather than being the token weird band at a bluegrass festival. We all just like so much different music, so getting to go to things like All Good and Bonnaroo is a lot of fun for us.

[LISTEN to a free five-song demo of Greensky Bluegrass' new album, "Handguns" on their Band Camp page.]

We just got back from the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco and that was really an amazing experience as well. Around 600,000 people in Golden Gate Park listening to bluegrass music is pretty cool.



Dobro - Photo Credit: KayEss

HM: You mentioned that you consider yourself a “weird” bluegrass band. How do you hear your style of bluegrass as distinct from other more traditional bands?

AB: I'd say it's an interesting thing because I think our albums are somewhat traditional at least. You can play them for a traditional bluegrass fan and they'd probably like them.

We like to play loud is the bottom line compared to traditional bluegrass festivals. Things like Hardly Strictly and Telluride are set up for us and what we do – they really embrace it. The more traditional bluegrass festivals that we play think we're loud.

HM: Do you write songs for Greensky? How does that process work?

AB: Everybody writes songs. Paul [Hoffman], the mandolin player, and Dave Bruzza, the guitar player, write the majority of songs I would say, but then we all co-write stuff together.

The first track on “Handguns” is a good example of one that Paul and I co-wrote where he had an idea for a song and I had an idea for a song and we ended up putting them together into something that was probably better than either of us could have done individually.

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We all have our hands in it as much as we possibly can. It's not like someone puts a piece of paper in front of us and says, “This is how it goes.” We all work in into what it will be in our live show or on the record.

HM: What role do you find yourself playing in the quintet setting? Do you mostly hold down a beat or improvise or do you all rotate parts?



Photo Courtesy of Greensky Bluegrass Facebook

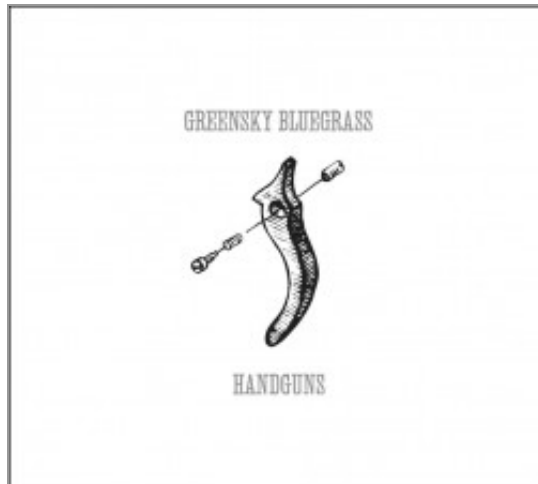
AB: We mix it up all the time and we all take turns with the rhythmic roles and lead roles and improvisational side of things. When we're playing a fast bluegrass song, it'll be flying by and everyone's taking solos. That's a really big part of the bluegrass thing and something that turned us on to it. That along with the improvisational nature of it. We all really mix it up and push each and explore together and separately all over the music.

HM: Many of your songs – like “All Four” for example – are pretty long. How did you all decide to include these suite-like songs on the album?

AB: It was scary to make the studio version of “All Four.” We knew we had to cut it down to something that was around 10 minutes whereas when we play it live it's 15 minutes or more. We knew that would be too much for an album, but we also all think that it's a really good tune and should be on the record. Just because it is an improvisational vehicle for us doesn't mean that we shouldn't put a version of it on the record.

When we went into the studio to record that, we looked at it like, “What are the signature parts of the jam or the jams in that song as they've evolved over the past six months in the live show?”

It was a really interesting exercise for us to say, “Ok, you take that Dobro part that's usually two minutes of jamming and you're gonna cut that down to 30 seconds. What is the most musical thing that has happened there over the past year of playing that song?”



Greensky Bluegrass' New Release "Handguns"

[READ Headstash Magazine's story on the evolution of bluegrass.]

We tried to really figure out what the quintessential goal of that part was without taking any time to get there. And then from there, we really tried to make melodies out of those jams and have people play them together. So that song we really just tried to turn it into the quintessential version of it.

Things like “Bring Out Your Dead” – that whole intro part just happened by accident. That was labeled as “Before Bring Out Your Dead” and Paul started sound checking his voice and messing around with different echoes and there happened to be a warped piano next to him. He just started playing it and we were all in the studio booth saying, “Record this, record this, record this!”

Paul didn't really know, he was just messing around, I think. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, we had this super cool intro to probably the darkest song on the record.

HM: Why do you think so many young people still relate to bluegrass, a genre that has been popular for over 80 years?

AB: The basis of it for me is that bluegrass can be played anywhere. You don't need drum sets and amplifiers or anything. You just need some acoustic instruments and some voices. And the idea that it could happen anywhere just ingrains it into people's hearts.



Photo Courtesy of Greensky Bluegrass Facebook

Just the fact that it's real music – it can be as bare-boned as music can be. It can just be three people singing harmonies and a guitar. I think that's a really big part of it.

Another thing is the improvisational nature in the music. As listeners, sometimes we forget about it – I know I did when I first started listening to bluegrass. That improvisational nature really focuses on the individual musicianship of each member, so as a listener and a fan you can really get to know certain players and latch onto that.

[READ Headstash Magazine's story on the current state of bluegrass music.]

I'll always be able to tell when Tony Rice is playing the guitar on a recording and I'm not sure I could really do that with other genres. Well, I guess I probably could. I could always tell when Trey is playing *[Laughs]*.

For us, as a band, it's really all about the songs that we get to write. We look at that as carrying on the tradition of bluegrass on some level. I'm not trying to say we're the future of bluegrass or anything – we're just trying to take these instruments and trying to make our own music with them.

I think that there's a really interesting evolution going on in the music itself, which is exciting to me. I'm happy to be a part of it.

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Greensky Bluegrass next show is Friday, October 14 at the 4th Annual "A Night At The Yards" in Washington D.C. For more information and a complete list of tour dates, check out their official website.

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