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# Greensky Bluegrass looks to break barriers with modern approach



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Playing it fast and loud, Greensky Bluegrass turns the tables on the genre's traditional approach at the Jefferson. "I think a big chunk of multiple generations sort of stumbled on bluegrass...through Jerry Garcia," said dobro player Anders Beck. Photo credit: Chris Monaghan

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9/17/14 at  
10:00 AM

The contentious divide between traditional bluegrass and progressive bluegrass is manufactured, according to Anders Beck, dobro virtuoso for the dogged newgrass outfit Greensky Bluegrass.

"I feel like that argument is more perpetuated by people that just want to talk about it than people who really feel that way," Beck told C-VILLE Weekly. "It's almost like talking politics, where you make a bigger deal of the fact that there is this issue than there really is."

Let's be clear: Greensky does not make traditional bluegrass music, and Beck isn't about to claim they do. When the band from Michigan visits The Jefferson Theater on September 18, its five string players will bring with them a decidedly rock-bluegrass hybrid, a style that has been bandied over the years among the influences of jam, country and western, blues, psychadelia, and more.

Composed of Dave Bruzza (guitar), Paul Hoffman (mandolin), Michael Bont (banjo), and Mike Devol (bass) in addition to Beck, Greensky plays the strings fast and loud. The five pickers are just as at home playing to a giant rock festival crowd as they are to a boutique group of Americana lovers. Much like the band they're often compared to, Yonder Mountain String Band, they're well known on the jam circuit, and that's more than a simple coincidence.

"I think a big chunk of multiple generations sort of stumbled on bluegrass...through Jerry Garcia," Beck said. "It is what opened me up, and from there I kind of worked backwards and learned about the history and tradition of the music."

When Greensky alights on Charlottesville, Beck and his mates will be coming out of the three-month haze that is the summer festival season, and that's something he said the band and its fans should be excited about.

"We've been super busy this summer, but it's all fly dates: we hop on a plane, fly to a festival, play a set or two, fly to another festival," he said. "It's a great way to do it, but there's not the consistency of being on tour. On tour, we get to dig a little deeper and play all the cuts you don't get to play at a festival."

Whether in a field or an intimate concert hall, Greensky has carved out its niche on the newgrass circuit by taking the big sound and light show of a rock concert and combining it with bluegrass through a uniquely Michigan-focused lens. Where traditional bluegrass might have featured lyrical content that highlighted the hardships of mining and "lonesomeness way back in the holler," Beck said Greensky draws on the darkness of the nation's fading industrial economy and the long winters of the Midwest's northern reaches.

Indeed, it's those unique lyrics and songwriting that drew Beck to Greensky when he left his previous band the Wayword Sons in late 2007.

"I started looking at groups of friends that were musicians and thinking, 'what is cool and what is next,'" he said. "Greensky really stood out to me."

In hindsight, his timing was impeccable. Beck attributes the origins of throwback music's current popularity to the Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, but it's only been since 2007 that bands like Mumford and Sons and The Avett Brothers have been making old timey string instruments—if not bluegrass itself—imminently cool.

"Anything that's turning people onto banjos and mandolins is good for everybody," Beck said. "That is real music."

Real music is something Greensky is still perfecting as it goes, Beck admitted. While each member of the band has long been skilled at plucking his own strings, learning how to layer a guitar, dobro, mandolin, banjo, and upright bass together is something that takes practice. That means Greensky has changed quite a bit over the years, but it also means they're arguably now at their best.

"We have sort of learned how to approach these instruments in a more mature way, where it is not like every song has to have a ripping banjo solo," Beck said. "We are trying to create textures with all of our instruments together, which is harder to do."

Beck figures it's that maturity that allowed the band to release its most accessible album yet, *If Sorrows Swim*, on September 9. Gone are the jams for the sake of jamming or the need to prove Greensky has jamming chops, and what's left is a more radio-ready album than the band has ever produced before, Beck said. It's a record that might be described as having more poppy elements than previous efforts, but that really seems to be nothing more than a synonym for "more catchy songs."

Still, the jam elements and other influences won't be gone during the next tour, Beck said. He likened Greensky to two bands in one, an arrangement that lets the Michiganders stretch themselves musically.

"There's the live show band, where it is this sort of combination of jam band and singer-songwriter band and bluegrass band," Beck said. "And then there's the album side of it, where we really sit down and focus on making a timeless thing. If all goes according to some great plan, it's a thing that people will be listening to for a long time. It's a trip."

