

Steep Canyon Rangers RADIO



What does North Carolina sound like?

In a state that's also produced Doc Watson, James Taylor and the Avett Brothers, there's hardly a more well-rounded answer than the Steep Canyon Rangers.

A bluegrass band at their core, the Steep Canyon Rangers effortlessly walk the line between festival favorite and sophisticated string orchestra. They're as danceable as the most progressive, party-oriented string band, and equally comfortable translating their songs for accompaniment by a full symphony.

It's that mix of serious chops and good-natured fun that earned the Steep Canyon Rangers the Grammy Award for Best Bluegrass Album Grammy in 2013 (for *Nobody Knows You*), and that drew celebrated comedian/banjoist Steve Martin to them when he needed a backing band. The Rangers are world-class musicians who are just as at home taking the stage at Carnegie Hall as they are knee-deep in a mountain brook, fly rod in hand.

Fifteen years and nine studio albums since forming in Chapel Hill, the sextet—who resides in the western N.C. mountains of Brevard and Asheville—returned to their roots at Echo Mountain Recording for their staggering new collection, *RADIO*. Recorded over three four-day sessions as the deep, snowy winter of 2015 held fast in the Blue Ridge, the band took full advantage of producer Jerry Douglas, who contributes his distinctive Dobro playing throughout the album.

"Jerry has this ability to stay rooted in bluegrass but also stretch it out," says Rangers guitarist and singer Woody Platt. "He's the perfect guy to help us navigate those waters."

Douglas fully immersed himself with the band, reworking song structures and vocal arrangements to craft a 12-song listening experience with a traditional A-side, B-side record mentality.

"They came in with the songs and arrangements...and I hacked and hewed and changed things around," says Douglas. "I threw some curveballs at them, and they hit every one of them."

The album's title track, "Radio," bats leadoff. Penned by banjoist Graham Sharp, the song recalls the days when hearing a favorite song required patiently waiting for a radio DJ to spin it, and the excitement of the Sunday afternoon Top 40 countdowns.

"I can recall all the spots where I first heard some of my favorite songs, from a fort in my bedroom to the backseat of my parents' car on the way home from church," Sharp recounts. "We trace our lives through music, and a song can take you right back to a place in time."

Opening with a virtuosic fiddle riff from Nicky Sanders—the only classically trained musician in the band and a graduate of the prestigious Berklee College of Music—“Radio” also demonstrates the band’s team mentality—Sharp’s initial version of the tune jumped straight to the verses, but in the hands of Douglas and the band, it morphed into a multi-faceted, dynamic canvas.

“It’s really gratifying to play music with people you can trust, who hear something and pull what’s best out of it into something truly special,” says Sharp. “As a songwriter, my favorite part of the whole thing is watching the band bring these ideas to life.”

Although Sharp penned eight of *RADIO*’s songs, he’s hardly the band’s only bard. Mandolinist Mike Guggino—who studies, performs and creates Italian music and cuisine when he’s home from tour—contributed the rousing instrumental “Looking Glass” (a nod to a favorite waterfall in Pisgah National Forest near his home).

Likewise, “Blue Velvet Rain” best exemplifies the band’s beautifully haunting penchant for yearning, high harmonies. The song, along with “Diamonds in the Dust” and “When the Well Runs Dry,” was co-written by upright bassist Charles R. Humphrey III, who balances his musical passions with a passion for ultramarathon racing.

“He would run 15 or 20 miles every day, then take a shower, come in and record,” recalls Douglas. “Everything I asked him to do...he just blew it out of the water.”

Then there’s “Break,” a rollicking, banjo-driven duet between Platt and his wife, singer Shannon Whitworth. Featuring Douglas’s unmistakable Dobro accompaniment, “Break” delivers all of the exhilarating energy of a hit pop song, with plenty of flourishes, but no fluff.

Throughout *RADIO*, multi-instrumentalist and longtime friend Mike Ashworth (who joined the band officially after being recruited to play drums with the band while on tour with Steve Martin and Edie Brickell), lends tasteful rhythm from his cajón box kit. Ashworth’s presence is both subtle and necessary, rounding out the full sound of a band that’s already on the main stage, and poised to stay there for the long haul.

“We’re just getting started,” Platt exudes. “It’s almost daunting, to think about how much more there is that we want to accomplish as the Steep Canyon Rangers. Each time I get off stage, I ask myself, ‘Was that fun? Did that feed your soul?’ That’s how we go about it, and more times than not, the answer is a rounding ‘Yes.’ We’re totally committed.”

By Stratton Lawrence

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