

A Story of Hindsight and a Hidden Cassette

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by Debra Young

In the late 1970s, a young Jim Lauderdale showed up in Nashville, Tenn. after college in North Carolina. The budding songwriter with bluegrass in his blood, a stunningly honest voice, and some serious chops on guitar, banjo, dobro, and harmonica, had followed his youthful instincts on the pilgrimage – hoping to meet his idols, George Jones and Roland White.

“I was kind of shy,” Lauderdale recalled.

He spoke to *The Bluegrass Standard* from the road between tour stops in Georgia, where he would be playing a bunch of shows featuring songs from his latest album, *Time Flies*, plus oldies from previously unreleased recordings he made with Roland White 39 years ago, during that fateful time in Nashville.

“Roland, I had been going to see, and he kindly let me sit in with him,” said Lauderdale. “I’d go over to his house and sing. It was just a real dream to be able to hang out with him because there was something about him and his voice; it was just so magical to me.”

Lauderdale and the mandolin master found an easy groove together, spending unhurried days laying down harmonies and making demos of originals and bluegrass standards.

“He suggested, ‘Hey why don’t we do a record?’” said

Lauderdale. The band they put together included Marty Stuart on lead guitar, plus eminent bluegrass instrumentalists, Gene Wooten, Terry Smith, Johnny Warren, and Stan Brown. They recorded the tracks in the basement of the home of the legendary Earl Scruggs.



“That was also very surreal for me to have Earl Scruggs downstairs, and bringing us coffee,” said Lauderdale. “To hear some of his stories...I had been a banjo player earlier, and I learned a lot of structure from him.”

The recordings – which resurfaced when White’s wife randomly came upon the old cassette – have an unadorned, front-porch-sitting kind of intimacy. The 12 tracks are pure bluegrass: sweet harmonies, rhythmic strumming and fiddle riffs that send the feet tapping on their own accord.

“I’ve lost my will/ my will to go on,” a 20-something Lauderdale sings in “Regrets and Mistakes” – one of the

originals in the collection. His vocals mix longing with the hopefulness of youth. The songwriting hints at the hit-maker Lauderdale would eventually become; his languid phrases echo in the ears even after the music ends.

But back then, Lauderdale had no idea where the future would lead. What he did know was record labels weren't interested in the recording, saying they didn't want to take a chance on somebody less familiar on the bluegrass circuit. So, he headed to New York City.

"I was disappointed when the record didn't come out," said Lauderdale, who speaks in a way that is down-to-earth and unassuming. "I came to New York and horizons opened."

It was in New York City, while working as a messenger for Rolling Stone magazine by day, that Lauderdale started to incorporate all the influences that have come to define his sound: It's a wide-ranging catchall includes rock n' roll, folk, bluegrass, country, soul, R&B and a touch of jazz. Lauderdale is widely recognized as king of the heartland soundscape and embracing genre, Americana.

The exchange of musical languages that gave birth to Americana was just taking shape in the early 80s in New York. Lauderdale talks reverently about all the friends and musical colleagues who welcomed him into the easy scene (Doc Thomas, Dr. John, Buddy Miller, John Campbell, John Messler, and others). Gigs, he said, were plenty and performed in venues ranging from Irish bars to rock n' roll dives and Texas-style clubs.



“I had known there was a folk and bluegrass tradition, so it was a real cool time to be in New York,” he said. “There was this theme and community.”

After making connections in New York, Lauderdale again followed his instincts, uprooting himself and heading to the other coast, to Los Angeles – where crossover music was big.

“A lot of great folks were in the scene out there. People were kind of calling it West Coast Country and alternative country,” he said.

In 1991, his first record, “Planet of Love,” was released. The auspicious debut stretched the country sound to embrace rock n’ roll grit, catchy pop hooks, honkytonk, and rockabilly.

Around that time, Lauderdale started singing harmonies on

Dwight Yoakam, Lucinda Williams, and Colleen Parker recordings. He got himself a publishing deal and has since written hundreds of songs for himself along with a roster of big-name stars.

Over the past four decades, Lauderdale has released nearly three dozen albums and he's collaborated with such artists as Buddy Miller, Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter, Elvis

Costello, Patti Loveless, Vince Gill, Blake Shelton, George Strait, Lee Ann Womak and The Dixie Chicks. He has toured with Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Nick Lowe, and Hootie & the Blowfish. He wrote and produced two bluegrass records with Ralph Stanley, and their first, "I Feel Like Singing Today," was nominated for a Grammy.

Lauderdale is quick to share credit for his success with his collaborators and mentors. With so many friends and a personality that is in equal measures approachable and magnetic, he has been a natural choice to host of the Americana Music Festival & Conference in Nashville, Tenn., which he will host again this year. The organization presented him with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 15th Annual Americana Honors & Awards in 2016.

"Time Flies" was released by Yep Roc Records August 3, 2018 – the same day "Jim Lauderdale and Roland White" hit the shelves. It is made up of 11 originals, which move fluidly between tracks in a style that is all Lauderdale's own. His plaintive vocals and layered lyrics evoke all that is sweet about the here and now, and all that is bittersweet about the way our moments turn into a memory.

"After the changes, you can't turn nothin' back/The different stages have played a different act/To our amazement, we almost made it/Until the curtain call/," he sings. "Time Flies/ Don't it seem like a dream come between when it could be calm?"

Here he is at age 61, on the cover of "Time Flies," light catching his silver sideburns and falling gracefully onto the shoulder-length hair poking out from under his cowboy hat. His Mona Lisa smile, mysterious and inviting, is the same smile that graces his lips on the cover of "Jim Lauderdale and Roland White." Dressed in a corduroy jacket with his arms crossed, he leans against a tree alongside White, who this year turned 80. The photo of the two longtime friends has the yellowish tones of a film print pulled from an old photo album. Despite the period in between the collections, Lauderdale's clean musical hooks and sliding vocal style define both.

Side-by-side these recordings take stock of life, its flow and surprises. Their story is his story, told with the wisdom of hindsight: Even though he had yearned for those bluegrass recordings to be made into a record 39 years ago, that cassette might have done him a favor to stay hidden and wait for the right time to emerge.

The pain he felt when the album got rejected by labels back then might have shifted Lauderdale's musical journey, giving him the space to turn his solid bluegrass foundation into something new and wonderful – a beacon for others to light their way by.

"I've had this theory for several years, if you start out in bluegrass you can go on to anything. It's such a good bedrock for any style of music," he said. "Bluegrass is so healthy and vital and growing and really in a great place. It's inspiring to see so many young great players. It's safe, it's got a future, that's comforting."

Lauderdale said he certainly envisions making more bluegrass records in the future.

"I still feel challenged by the process of making records and writing songs and touring," he said. "I'm glad. I'm grateful

things are where they are.”

<https://youtu.be/csSggqzv1Zw>