

BRANDED BLUEGRASS: FAMILY BAND FOR THE WORKING MAN

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by Stephen Pitalo

For those who remember the *Branded* show, an American Western TV series that aired on NBC from the 1960s, the theme comes to mind: “What do you do when you’re branded, will you fight for your name?” The members of Branded – the heralded bluegrass band, that is – do not need to fight for their moniker: it was bestowed upon them by no less than bluegrass legend Bill Monroe.

“Not too many bands can say that the Father of Bluegrass is directly responsible for naming their group,” explained Larry Norfleet, a founding member of Branded. Branded Bluegrass started with Larry and Jesse along with good friend Donny Fritz. Back in 1986, the three came up with an instrumental and had the honor to play the song on stage at the world-famous Bean Blossom Festival.

“We were backed up during the performance by a few of Bill Monroe’s own Bluegrass Boys. After playing under the watchful eye of the Father of Bluegrass himself, Mr. Monroe applauded and said, ‘you boys are branded!’ That is how the namesake came about and we couldn’t be more proud of it.”

Growing up in Nancy, KY. before making their way to Indiana, Larry and Jesse cut their teeth early on in jam sessions their dad would host. After moving to Indiana to live with their mother, who was heavily involved in the country music

business, the boys' stepfather bought them some new instruments, and their love for bluegrass grew even stronger.

"Fast forward many years, we decided the time was now or never to really push to play

outside of the state and local community. After self-releasing our debut album *Simple Days*, we decided to step up the game. We recorded our second album *Most Welcome* at Hayes Studios with Clay Hess, who engineered and produced the album. That really helped launch us to another level."

After releasing *Most Welcome*, Norfleet talked to Melanie Wilson of Wilson Pickins Promotions (WPP).

"Melanie didn't have any bands in the Midwest, so she took a leap of faith and took a chance on us. What a blessing it has been to be a part of team WPP and represented by Melanie! She has opened doors for us where we would never have had a chance and we are grateful for her and her services. She has recently got us paired up and signed with Bell Buckle Records that is owned and ran by the awesome, Valerie Smith. We are so excited about so many good things happening for us right now! Maybe we can get through 2020 and take our show across the nation."

Norfleet said, "We are known to have a traditional sound. Most promoters enjoy our hard-driving energy and song array. Even though we are a traditional band, we aren't afraid to cover some non-bluegrass tunes such as 'Proud Mary,' 'Bad Bad Leroy Brown,' or 'Dire Wolf' from The Grateful Dead and drive the fire out of them."

One of the band's most requested covers is a country song done by Clay Walker back in the early '90s titled, "If I Could Make

A Living Out of Loving You". Growing up on Flatt and Scruggs, Bill Monroe, The Stanley Brothers, and Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver, Norfleet admitted that it's hard to get away from that traditional sound.

<https://youtu.be/aRxNMYNfcBM>

"Our new project that is set to release soon contains songs that are not as traditional as we have recorded in the past," Norfleet said. "The material is great and is a nice stretch to get us outside of our comfort zone. That being said, our fans won't be disappointed because they will still feel that traditional vibe on the new material."

When asked just what makes Branded Bluegrass different from your regular bluegrass band, Norfleet said that's a tough question to answer, but that being labeled a true workingman's band sets them apart.

"Not being a national act yet, most of the members of Branded Bluegrass have established careers and are close to being able to retire," Norfleet said. "To travel and perform, we have to use personal time and vacation time from work. Balancing those schedules to allow us to travel and play can be tricky! Stories in songs are what we like to share. Songs that people can relate to and take them to a time in their memory. The thing that brings us the most joy is seeing the smiles and people enjoying what they hear. If we can take them away from the hustle and worries of everyday living, that is worth any amount we could earn. We don't play for fame or fortune. Don't get me wrong, we still like to eat, so a few coins for a burger doesn't hurt either."

Norfleet also said that, like other family bands, the trials and tribulations of being in a band with siblings can be trying, so much so that sometimes their mom or the wives have to step in.

“We have stood the test of time so we must be doing something right,” Norfleet laughed. “Just like any other band, we have our disagreements. As brothers, Jesse and Larry have some pretty good arguments, but give it a few and they’re back just like brothers should be. On the plus side, we know we can count on each other. Having Larry’s son, Tristen in the band, he gets to be the mediator between Larry and Jesse. You would think he would side with his dad all the time but right is right and dad has been wrong, and Jesse wins those arguments. Tristen sings a song titled Most Welcome and Larry teases that it is the only way he can get Tristen to thank him. It’s all in jest though. He makes his dad proud by getting to share the stage with him.

“Charlie Firnekas is a true-life cowboy out in Wyoming,” said Norfleet when asked just who is the Charlie in “When Charlie Dreams.” “One of the writers of ‘When Charlie Dreams,’ David Stewart, was a lifetime friend with Charlie. One day while sitting in a restaurant with Charlie and the co-writer, Brice Long, Charlie was reminiscing on his life and David said you could see Charlie come to life in those daydreams. This song became quite special for us. Charlie passed the week we went into the studio. There is a video of Larry getting emotional while laying down the vocals.”

SPOTLIGHT ON BRANDED BLUEGRASS



Tristen Norfleet: This kid is a major talent! He can play every instrument on stage and shares much of the lead singing as well as harmonies. He has a uniqueness about his vocals and has come a long way since becoming a member at the ripe age of 16 years old. After many of the shows, folks come up and say they want to hear him sing more. Tristen is an old soul with a young feel. He brings all kinds of different material and helps arrange it to keep things fresh with the younger crowd. He is also starting to home in his writing skills. Look for some of his originals real soon."

Jesse Norfleet: founding member and once you meet him, he is one of those guys you never forget. He is always smiling and upbeat. He is the dreamer of the band and approaches everything at 100%. He also plays all the instruments on stage as well as dobro. Whatever we need him to do he is willing and works hard at it. Jesse is who keeps us grounded in traditional music. He prefers the old traditional music and has a Daxe Evans or Ralph Stanley feel to his banjo style

Larry Norfleet: younger brother to Jesse and the other founding member. He carries the load of being the band's leader and face of Branded Bluegrass. Larry does most of the lead singing and tenor vocals. His primary focus is on rhythm guitar but also plays mandolin and bass. On top of a great rhythm hand, he is a formidable songwriter and arranges many of the songs we play.

Mike Martin: plays upright bass and he is the thinker of the group. He is always trying to figure out the business. He is never late and keeps us locked in on time. That must be a bass player thing! He is also the guy that gets picked on during those road trips. He keeps us laughing and the trips would definitely be dull without him

Gil Benson: plays fiddle with the band as often as he can. He is a perfectionist and has a great ear. Gil can also play all the instruments on stage. He does his best to try and keep us eating healthy and knows if there is a Panera in the area. Lol. Gil brings excitement to the show and when he plays our energy level goes up a few notches.