

Appalachian Road Show

by Susan Marquez

“This band is all about emotional impact,” says Jim VanCleve, fiddler for Appalachian Road Show, a young band in terms of when it was formed, but heavy on experience. “There is enough artistry in this camp that things have come together very quickly. As a matter of fact, we are shocked at how fast things have taken off. We had hoped for steady and positive growth. We are thrilled that the band has been received so well. It’s both exciting and encouraging.”

The band was just an idea, “probably while I was driving,” recalls VanCleve. “I put it on a back burner because I was working with Josh Turner’s band.” Over the years, VanCleve has been in two bands with banjoist Barry Abernathy. “Barry also drives tour buses for artists like Hank Williams, Jr., Dolly Parton, Jason Aldean, Blake Shelton, and others. Wouldn’t you know, he was driving the bus for Josh Turner! What are the chances of that?” Abernathy had to have surgery to repair degenerative disks in his neck that would involve moving his voice box, and doctors couldn’t promise he’d have the same powerhouse vocals after the surgery. “Before the surgery, Barry recorded songs he loved just so he’d have them,” says VanCleve. “He started seeing a theme to the songs. I had thought of doing a variety-type road show, and he wanted to make it Appalachian. That was perfect because it’s so personal to both of us.”

Abernathy handled the surgery beautifully, and in 2018 Appalachian Road Show hit the road. The group seeks to honor the music, traditions, and history of the Appalachian region and its people. “It is authentic, in a cultural sense,” says VanCleve. “It’s the most pure, authentic expression of this music as we can deliver. No bells. No whistles. It’s delivered

as starkly as possible, via world-class musicians. Each of us is an old soul, and we combine our artistry and talents with a common goal.”

VanCleve grew up in the western mountains of Haywood County, North Carolina and began playing the fiddle at the age of eight. He played with bands including Ric-o-Chet, Lou Reid & Carolina, Rambler’s Choice, and Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver when he was a teenager. In 1998 he joined Mountain Heart and in time became an A-List Nashville session musician.

Rounding out the group are GRAMMY award-winning Todd Phillips on bass, acoustic guitar phenom Zeb Snyder, and tenor singer and mandolin-player Darrell Webb. “I had produced a record for Darrell Webb,” says VanCleve, “and his embodiment of that lonesome tenor sound that is truly Appalachia was something I felt we needed. Plus, Darrell plays lots of instruments, which is great for us.”

The band was the first signed by the Nashville’s newest bluegrass label, Billy Blue Records. Their self-named debut album along with the vitality of their stage show is designed to both entertain and educate folks on the musical style and culture of the Appalachian Mountains and the people, including providing history about the instruments being played and the background of the songs performed. “We provide a musical experience,” says VanCleve. The album was nominated for IBMA Album of the Year.

The guys in Appalachian Road Show aren’t resting on the success of their first record. “There were multiple number ones on the album,” says VanCleve, “and it spent months at the top of the chart.” That just fueled them to get busy on the next project. “We are ridiculously excited about it. We’ve put

a solid industry team together. It's not just a collection of songs, but an immersive cultural experience of where we call home. And of course, we'll bring all that to the stage for our shows."

It's the authenticity that is so important to VanCleve and the others in Appalachian Road Show. VanCleve is remaining true to the sound the band has developed as he produces the new project. "I've produced 35 records, including records for just about everyone in the band. They all trust me. It's a matter of being authentic. As a matter of fact, we've coined a phrase that we had printed on t-shirts," he says. "Authenticity never goes out of style. With this next project, we are going to take a deeper dive with a continued narrative. It's awesome that this band works as well as it does. Sometimes you try things and it just doesn't work for whatever reason. But this is working, and we have a goal and we feel it emotionally. It's working like gangbusters and we're going to keep riding the wave!"

***See more about The Appalachian Road Show:
<https://www.theappalachianroadshow.com/>***