

Phil Leadbetter is Laying Back and...Working Hard

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by Kara M. Bachman

The past year has been a little rough for Grammy-nominated dobro maestro Phil Leadbetter. He's rolling with the punches though, and making lemonade out of lemons. In fact, he's working on *a whole bunch* of lemonade.

"I've been on cancer treatment for like ten years, and I just started in July on dialysis," he said.

In addition to the difficulties of working around Covid-19, he's also had to work around his health issues. He's been sitting out the performing and...is somehow...*still working hard*.

He's working now on two upcoming records to be released through Mountain Home Records. The first is a dobro project that includes a couple dozen of the highest-level players of the instrument.

"I've got all the best dobro players," Leadbetter said.

He rattled off a list that was too long to recount, but a few names included notable musicians such as Andy Hall, Justin Moses, Abby Gardner, Orville Johnson, and Curtis Burch of New Grass Revival. It'll be called "The Masters of Reso" and is expected to drop this spring.

The second project is his Phil Leadbetter and the Allstars of Bluegrass, a collection of musicians he loves jamming with. The band used to include his longtime friend Steve Gulley, who

passed away this past fall and whose loss has been particularly difficult for Leadbetter.

They used to travel together and were close friends. Gulley's replacement in the Allstars will be Gena Britt, perhaps best known for her work with Sister Sadie. She'll take over the bass but Leadbetter stresses that nobody, even a talent such as Britt, could take the place of his longtime bandmate and good friend who he still mourns.



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He'll enter the studio to begin work on this other record sometime in April.

Both projects are helping him forget his health problems and personal losses. Leadbetter also has some cool stuff to look back on when he needs an uplift. For instance, ...how many people can claim to have not one, but *TWO* guitars named after you?

"I knew a guy I grew up with who went to work for Gibson," Leadbetter reminisced.

He gave the company tips on what he'd like to see in an ideal instrument and was a big part of the creation of a new Gibson dobro. It ended up bearing his name.

"I got to be really good friends with Greg Rich at Gibson," he said.

Rich – who revived Gibson's banjo image

late 1980s and early 1990s – colorful and creative personality at the company. He left Gibson in the early 1990s and became the head creative honcho at Recording King, where he consulted Leadbetter when he was ready to design a great, yet affordable resonator.

"I gave him a plan...they came up with a prototype and then a final. Since then, it's been their {recording King's} bestselling resophonic guitar."

He said he and Rich both wanted to create something that wasn't expensive.

"I told Greg, I said, let's build something at around \$1,200." In Leadbetter's mind, this was affordable, as many dobros are priced in the \$3,000 to \$4,000 range. In the end, he was pleasantly surprised...Rich and his team got costs down so the Phil Leadbetter Signature Resonator model could be offered at

a price point of just \$600. To Leadbetter, nothing at all was lost in making it affordable.

“These guitars are built so much better than my Gibsons,” he said. “The quality control at Gibson got bad...but Recording King...their dobro...in these lists and player groups, everybody’s got one. They sound good and people can take them where they don’t want to take an expensive one and they don’t have to sacrifice tone.”

As Leadbetter focuses on getting well again, he’s got a lot – both past and present – to look forward to.

“Right now, I’m just laying back a little and seeing what’s happening. I just want to get playing again and be out there and seeing all of our friends.”



2005,2014 And 2019 IBMA “Dobro Player of The Year”

2008, 2009, And 2020 SPBGMA “Dobro Player of The Year”

2015 Member Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame

1994 Grammy Nominee

Kentucky Colonel

Tennessee Colonel

5x Cancer Survivor