

Roll Out The Barrel!

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by Susan Marquez

Whiskey barrels. Beer barrels. The kind of barrels one thinks of when in a bar. At least, that is the inspiration for a bluegrass band from Toronto, Canada. The year was 2012 when the five-piece string band was established. “We got a regular Tuesday night gig at a dive bar in Toronto where we played bluegrass standards,” says Nathan Smith. “We needed a band name for the bar to put on their sign. A few potential names were thrown around before our bass player, Tim O’Reilly, suggested The Barrel Boys. We thought it would be fine for a while, but the name stuck. It made sense for us because we are a fun, joyful, easy-going band.”

The band members met when they were in jazz school together.

“Despite being in a jazz program, we all had backgrounds in American music,” says Nathan. “We discussed our common interests in bluegrass, but from different angles. I had played fiddle in a bluegrass band, and Rob McLaren and Ben Wright had played in an Americana band. And our dobro player, Kyle Kirkpatrick, had played in his dad’s country band.” The band came together when they got a gig at a local café. “We started jamming and realized that we each had songs to bring to the table.” That was when they began a two-year residency at Toronto’s Cloak and Dagger Pub, where they performed three-hour sets every Tuesday evening.

The band’s first recording was an EP of their favorite Christmas carols, played in the bluegrass style.

“We really enjoyed that,” Nathan says. “We also recorded a Gospel LP that was fun to do. We are considering another

themed EP. We've also talked about doing an album of original instrumentals."



The Barrel Boys' most recent LP, *Mainline*, was released in July. Instead of a grand tour to promote the album, the band had to be content with a live stream event that featured side A of the album. While it was not the ideal scenario, it did provide those who are not able to go to live shows the opportunity to see the band play. "I have relatives who have never seen me play," Nathan says. "I have cousins who are farmers, and they can't get away for a live show, but with the live stream, they could stay home and have a date night and watch our show. I was pretty happy about that." The album is available via streaming or on CD. "A vinyl version will be released this fall."

While 2020 was promising to be a breakout year for The Barrel Boys, the COVID pandemic changed their trajectory. "We are so proud of how this new album sounds, and we were so excited

about taking this new music on tour,” says Nathan. “We were booked at festivals that I’ve always dreamed of playing, and we were also scheduled to teach at some amazing camps. It may be hard to regain that momentum going forward. But at the same time, it has forced us to be creative in how we released the project, and with our videos.”

The band has some excellent music videos, shot by musician/videographer Tom Berry.

<https://youtu.be/mkk3y7tSG0s>

“We were floored with what he did,” says Nathan. “He understands music and arrangements and he did an amazing job shooting and editing the videos.” The band usually performs with one microphone, but that was a little different in the videos.

“We love the richness of the sound that one microphone gives. I love hearing the voices mix in the air. We are accustomed to performing that way. It’s a thrill for us.” The decision not to use one mic in the videos comes from the band’s respect for COVID guidelines. “We wanted to cater to our audience, and we didn’t want to put out content that defied the guidelines established to slow the spread of the virus. The context was important, and I think it made for interesting videos.”

While the band enjoys playing standards, songwriting has opened creative avenues for them. They write the standard bluegrass themes, including “trains, heartbreak, mining, and murder,” but their songs have a decidedly Canadian context. “We bring our own experience into the stories,” says Nathan. “Everyone in the band enjoys writing songs. It would be a shame not to use the creativity we possess.”

Music is the mainstay for The Barrel Brothers. “Some of the band members are teachers, and the band is a significant side

project for them. Others, like me, are full-time

professional musicians who also play with other projects. Pre-COVID, we played just about every weekend, and we taught at bluegrass camps. In the summers it was touring and playing festivals.” The band does not see each other as frequently as they once did. “We used to live within three subway stops of each other but eventually we have spread out and most don’t actually live in Toronto at all. We must be more intentional with our time together. It is much more concentrated, which in some ways is great. It forces us to cultivate more opportunities and new projects. We are always looking ahead.”