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Mark Stoffel Takes a Break from the Night Drivers to Deliver a Solo Project with a Side of Togetherness

by Stephen Pitalo *(feature photo by Kate Weeks)*

One wouldn't guess that Mark Stoffel, an Illinois resident and bluegrass stalwart, grew up in Munich, Germany.

"My connection to Illinois is Southern Illinois University at Carbondale," Stoffel said, which is where I got a bachelor's degree in 1992. I was always drawn back to this area. It is beautiful, and I had made so many friends here that I immigrated from Germany 20 years ago, and I live here now with my family."

Stoffel became a U.S. citizen in 2016, but his musical tastes are American through and through, having been bitten by the bluegrass bug as a teenager.





Back then, it was difficult to find Bluegrass Records in Munich," Stoffel said, "but I had most of the David Grisman Records, New Grass Revival, Tony Rice, Seldom Scene, Hot Rize, and Country Gazette. Also, even at that time, many American bluegrass artists were touring Europe, so I got to see most of the bands mentioned here in person, plus Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, Tony Trischka & Skyline, Cloud Valley, and Bill Keith."

He even saw Chris Jones & the Night Drivers, a band he ended up joining in 2006. Stoffel listened mostly to AFN radio (Armed Forces Network), on AM radio, where seventies artists

like Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles were daily aural sustenance for his ears. Stoffel got a mandolin for Christmas in 1979, and after finding Jack Tottle's "Bluegrass Mandolin" book in a local music store, he started learning the fiddle.

"I cut my teeth on fiddle tunes and Bluegrass standards before I discovered an interest in creating my own tunes," he explained. "Composing didn't come easy at first, I had to learn to totally open my mind to new ideas and to accept them as not just valid, but valuable and beautiful. Before I made that mental adjustment, I would just too easily dismiss ideas for tunes as "trivial" or "boring", which I now regret. There's a book out there, recommended to me by my friend Nate Lee – who used to play with Becky Buller – called "Effortless Mastery" by Kenny Werner. It basically states that as an artist you better appreciate and embrace your own art, your own creations, and not worry about what other people may think about it. Everybody is unique in some way and has something special to offer. That book helped me greatly in realizing my own potential."

After his first gig at his school in a suburb of Munich with a band called Greenback Dollar, who mostly were concerned with their outfits and less about the music. When he was mistakenly given a mandolin for Christmas instead of a ukulele, his experience in folk, rock, and bluegrass bands melded into a lifelong artistic pursuit. During this time, he began to connect with American artists, helping to arrange tour dates and providing hospitality—including the artist who would become his future employer, Chris Jones.

As his time in the U.S. became more frequent and prolonged, his playing, growing expertise in sound engineering and vocal harmony abilities earned him increased attention, which came first with regional

acts, then with Jones' singer/songwriter wife, Sally Jones, and finally with Jones himself. Mark joined Chris Jones and

the Night Drivers sometime around the band's 2009 *Cloud of Dust* record.

"Mark is one of the most musical mandolin players I've ever played with," says Chris Jones. "Mandolin players are really impressed with his playing everywhere we go."

Stoffel recently recruited friends for an album project he titled *Coffee and Cake*. He said the time was right and the stars were aligned.

"I was ready for it!" he explained. "I had a bunch of tunes, I had finished a suitable recording space at our house, the kids were finally older and more independent, so I had more time for myself, and everything lined up perfectly. And having played in a professional outfit for almost 15 years, touring nationally and internationally, meant that I got to meet and make friends with some of my musical heroes, many of whom I invited to play on the album."

The album was co-produced by Josh Morrison, who also plays all guitar tracks on the album.

The rehearsals gave Morrison and Stoffel the chance to really prepare, and bassist Ross Sermons also worked to help fill out the sound for this record.

"Ross, Josh and I recorded all the basic tracks together and live," Stoffel said. "The three of us seem to live and breathe music in the same way. It's like, when you have moments of hesitation in a piece, we are all in sync. There are only a few musicians who work like that, who are tuned 100% to the band, and less to themselves. I hope that makes sense."

In Stoffel's mind, the term "coffee and cake" just encapsulates happiness, with Stoffel having grown up in what he deems "a coffee & cake culture." He described it as that era when people would get together mid-afternoon to take a

break and celebrate community and togetherness. And of course, eat coffee and cake.

<https://youtu.be/nMFTxNPyApQ>

“In this day and age, where people can download individual tracks from the internet, listen on Spotify, create their own playlists, and where songs get released to the radio individually, the importance of an “album” definitely seems to diminish,” lamented Stoffel. “I personally look at an album as an artistic statement. Each track is a part of the bigger picture. The order matters. And even the cover art becomes part of the message, the statement. And if we get back on the road, I’ll have the CD for sale at the record table.”

During the pandemic, Stoffel has longed to get back to playing live, like so many of his colleagues.

“I really miss gigging and touring, but fortunately I don’t depend on income from music, unlike so many of my musician friends,” he said. “I can’t even imagine how they went through this stretch of time. And it’s not like

it’s over – gigs are still rare. Chris Jones & the Night Drivers will play their first gig since March of 2020 on Labor Day weekend 2021. Just wow!”

Stoffel said he sees the summer as less busy but is gearing up for a busy fall.

“I am afraid not much touring will be happening this summer,” he said. “Touring won’t start until early September, but I’m compiling tunes for the next CD and hope to continue to do so throughout the year. Coffee and Cake is doing pretty well, even getting a bunch of national airplays, so I’ll try to get the momentum going!”