

Russ Barenberg is a guitarist in the bluegrass progressive tradition

BY WALTER TUNIS

from Pop Matters, McClatchy Newspapers (MCT) 14 April 2008

Never mind that the guitarist was among a pack of eager bluegrass thrill seekers in the 1980s, a gang that included star players like Bela Fleck and Jerry Douglas, that forged new acoustic voices for stringed things that usually spoke in bluegrass tongues. In Barenberg's book, the most traditional forms of bluegrass are, almost by definition, progressive.

"The way I approach music revolves around a discovery process," said Barenberg. There is this excitement over discovering the music, but you're always respectful about where the music came from - especially when you have learned from some of the values in traditional music. Still, I think you've also got to be careful when you use that term 'traditional music.' For instance, people talk about 'traditional bluegrass.' You hear that term a lot. Well, in 1946, bluegrass was brand-new. It wasn't traditional music. It was just as much of an experiment from what came before it as anything we're doing now. It's a continuous process for musicians and creative people. They discover new things but appreciate music from the past at the same time."

Barenberg took up the guitar in his early teens. With Chester County, Penn., as his home, he absorbed the music of such vanguard Americana guitarists as Doc Watson and Clarence White. "I never thought of pursuing this music as a way to make a living when I was young," Barenberg said. "I just thought of it as something I was really excited about. One reason would definitely be Clarence White and that whole break-free, experimental energy that his playing had. That sounded pretty remarkable to me. But that was when I was a teenager."

From that point on, Barenberg's career took him to bands that boasted some of the most prestigious string players in the land.

In 1970, while attending Cornell University, he picked with banjo stylists Pete Wernick and Tony Trischka in a bluegrass outfit called Country Cooking. Collaborations with Trischka continued after Barenberg moved to New York. There the two formed Heartlands with fiddler Matt Glaser and Country Cooking guitarist John Miller. Barenberg finished the decade in Boston with fiddler-mandolinist Jay Ungar in the ensemble Fiddle Fever. Their recording of "Ashokan Farewell" received a new life as part of the soundtrack to the Ken Burns documentary "The Civil War."

But it was in the '80s that the string sounds Barenberg discovered with new pals like dobroist Douglas began to make serious waves. By 1986, Barenberg moved to Nashville. Almost familial recording projects ensued with Fleck, fiddlers Stuart Duncan and Mark O'Connor, Irish-born singer Maura O'Connell and an instrumental trio with Douglas and bassist Edgar Meyer. The latter toured extensively in the early '90s. In

1993 came “Skip, Hop and Wobble,” an album that neatly summarized the broad stylistic scope of the trio’s new grass vision.

“We were just having fun,” Barenberg said. “All of us were interested in different kinds of music and played stringed instruments of one sort or another. There were all kinds of experimentation going on. But it wasn’t even so much like we were trying to experiment. We never set out to do that. It was just part of our natural approach to playing music.”

Curiously, Barenberg lived a double life during these years. By night, he was picking behind O’Connell or jamming with Douglas and Meyer. By day, he worked in training development and instructional design for the Saturn car company. While such a seemingly removed work environment didn’t curtail his performance life, it cramped his solo recording career a bit.

To celebrate a recent re-entrance into a full-time music career, Barenberg has released the first recording under his own name in nearly 20 years. Titled “When at Last,” the record boasts a scrapbook of grassy adventures that mix fiddle tunes, guitar-mandolin romps, French folk music, Irish inspiration and even a suggestion of polka. Topping the list is a nimble bit of breezy picking backed by pals Douglas, Duncan and bassist Viktor Krauss called Little Monk. The tune was nominated earlier this year for a Grammy.

“I don’t know why I waited so long to make another record,” Barenberg said. “I had been working this non-music job for such a long time. But that’s really no excuse. It was definitely time to do one.”

Life away from Saturn has also included trips with Tim O’Brien to Ireland for a TV performance project called “The Transatlantic Sessions,” an ongoing touring collaboration with fellow bluegrass-bred guitarist Bryan Sutton, teaching duties and occasional recording studio session work in Nashville.

“I don’t know if working a day job has freshened my perspective on the music, really. The music always leads its own life, no matter what I’m doing. All I know is it is definitely invigorating and I’m excited to be doing it. It just feels like the right thing.”