

Blue Highway

BY MATT BLACKETT

“PEOPLE ALWAYS WANT TO KNOW HOW WE arrange songs,” says Blue Highway’s resonator royalty Rob Ickes, “They’ll ask, ‘How do you decide who’s taking the next solo?’ I tell them that we just start playing. A lot of people spend too much time talking about music. Bluegrass is a language that everyone in this band has grown up speaking, so we don’t

have to say much to play it.”

They might not say much with words, but the members—Jason Burleson (guitar, mandolin, banjo), Wayne Taylor (bass, vocals), Shawn Lane (mandolin, fiddle, vocals),

Alison Krauss alum Tim Stafford (guitar, vocals), and nine-time IBMA Dobro Player of the Year winner Ickes—speak volumes on their instruments. Their ninth album, *Through the Window of a Train* [Rounder], is packed with killer flat-picking, amazing resonator work, and the kind of head-spinning call-and-response instrumental sparring that make bluegrass so damn

exciting. And they do it all with almost no prep—not even picking out the tunes until the day before the sessions. The end result is a sound and a vibe that none other than Ricky Skaggs described as, “fresh, but as old as the hills.”

“A lot of people say jazz is the only American music form where there’s improvisation,” says Rob Ickes, “but there’s a lot in bluegrass.”

How did the trade-offs between guitar and Dobro on “Life of a Traveling Man” come about?

Stafford: Rob leads it. He’s the call, and I’m the answer. I try to pick it up where he leaves it, take it in another direction, and then hand it off to him again—like a musical relay. Whatever I do is based on what he’s doing. I don’t think we even talked about it. This is a very live record, and I think that’s a first take.

The solo section definitely stretches out harmonically and rhythmically. What can you tell me about the note choices?

Ickes: I don’t really think about note choices. It’s sort of like a writer who writes a fiction book. When you read it, there are all these things that tie together, but I don’t think the writer is always thinking about that as he’s writing. So, when it comes to a solo, you just follow your instincts, and, when it’s all done, you go, “Wow, that really fits in with the lyric or the vibe.” I don’t know where it comes from. It’s improvised.

How did you track “Sycamore Hollow”? Are you all sitting in the same room?

Stafford: Shawn also played guitar on that tune, and I played rhythm guitar. He and I were in the same room with baffles between us. Dobro, bass, and banjo were all in separate rooms.

Ickes: I’ve done records where we all sit in a circle, and I love that. This studio was nice because, even though we were separated, we could maintain eye contact.

There are other great solo breaks in that tune. Did you record those with the basics, or as overdubs?

Stafford: We’ve never really done it this way, but we decided that if we couldn’t do something totally live, rather than overdub, we would do several takes in a row, and then edit some takes together if we had to. “Sycamore Hollow” is pretty much a live cut—with the vocal and all the rhythm instruments going down live—but I think there may have been some editing in the

trade-off section.

Ickes: Just about everything—including all the unison lines between guitar and Dobro—were cut totally live. The solo section in the middle does come from a different take. Everybody liked what was going on between the Dobro and the mandolin on the previous pass, and the tempo matched up fine, so we just took it. There was a lot of neat stuff on this record where we just captured a good moment, and that’s what I’m always looking for in the studio—magic.

Stafford: It’s kind of amazing that the tempo matched up on that song, because we didn’t use any kind of click track. But this sort of editing is pretty easy nowadays.

What instruments did you play on “Sycamore Hollow”?

Ickes: I played a custom guitar—it’s not a resonator. Tim Scheerhorn, who builds my resonators, built this one, and it’s basically an acoustic guitar with the action raised up. It’s a little more ancient sounding—which

was good for a song about the Civil War era. I also tuned down, and that really makes it sound more old-timey. It's open-G tuning, but down a step and a half to *E, G#, B, E, G#, B*. That tuning gives it some nice buzz and string noise. On Dobro, you spend your life trying to play clean, but, sometimes, it's nice to get some noise in there to kind of get that bottleneck sound. I take that guitar to all my sessions, because I never know when it might come in handy. I mic it behind the soundhole—near the right-hand corner. It pushes a lot of air, so I back the mic away a little bit. If I mic it right on the soundhole, it's too bassy and woofy. I have a great old Neumann KM 86 that I use for this guitar and my resonators.

Stafford: I used my 1934 Martin D-18. That's my main guitar, and I played it on all but two songs on this record. For the other two, "Two Soldiers" and "A Week from Today," I used a Composite Acoustics Bluegrass Standard.

How would you describe how the CA sits in the mix compared to your Martin?

Stafford: I was really surprised. Most people who listen can't tell that much difference. The CA is a very even-sounding guitar. It's all carbon fiber—no wood. It feels like a vintage guitar when you play it, but a lot more balanced. It matches the D-18 better than you might think. Those old D-18s dry out, and, because they're mahogany, they're not nearly as boomy as rosewood guitars. A lot of engineers have told me they think the CA sounds great. I used it on Andy Hall's latest album, and he said it was the best-sounding guitar on the record. In the studio, I mic it. Live, I use the onboard Fishman Aura system, set to almost 100 percent Aura.

Were any songs particularly difficult to get recorded?

Ickes: This record fell into place really easily. There's a tricky melody on "The North Cove," and that's one where I definitely worked on it some before we went into the studio. Tim plays some great lead guitar breaks on that one.

Stafford: This was the easiest record we've made. It didn't take long to do. "V-Bottom Boat" took as long to record as it takes to listen to it. That's live with one mic—first take.

Rob, your intonation is really spot-on when you play resonator. How do you play so consistently in tune?

Ickes: For me, intonation is a two-way street. Everybody else has to be in tune for me to play in tune. When I'm on a session, if the singer is off key, nothing works. I was talking to Norm Hamlet, who plays pedal-steel with Merle Haggard, and I said, "Man your pitch is so right on the money!" He said, "I just listen to Merle, because Merle's pitch is incredible."

Tim, what's the key to getting a good individual tone that also blends with all the other instruments?

Stafford: It's a challenge, and it has a lot to do with being able to hear yourself. If you can't hear yourself, you're gonna play too hard, and there goes your tone. If I can hear myself, I can really lay back on my attack. That's the key. It's amazing how light you need to play to get good tone. After that, it's about really listening to everybody else—which we're all good at because we've been playing together for so long. The most important thing, though, is to listen to the tune. Shawn said it best: "If you listen close enough, the song will tell you what it wants to do." ■

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