

Railroad Earth

There's a great scene in *The Last Waltz* – the documentary about The Band's final concert – where director Martin Scorsese is discussing music with drummer/singer/mandolin player Levon Helm. Helm says, "If it mixes with rhythm, and if it dances, then you've got a great combination of all those different kinds of music: country, bluegrass, blues music, show music..."

To which Scorsese, the inquisitive interviewer, asks, "What's it called, then?" "Rock & roll!" Clearly looking for a more specific answer, but realizing that he isn't going to get one,

Marty laughs. "Rock & roll..." "Well, that's the way it is sometimes: musicians play music, and don't necessarily worry

about where it gets filed. It's the writers, record labels, managers, etc., who tend to fret about what "kind" of music it is. And like The Band, the members of Railroad Earth aren't losing sleep about what "kind" of music they play – they just play it. When they started out in 2001, they were a bunch of guys interested in playing acoustic instruments together. As Railroad Earth violin/vocalist Tim Carbone recalls, "All of us had been playing in various projects for years, and many of us had played together in different projects. But this time, we found ourselves all available at the same time."

Songwriter/lead vocalist Todd Sheaffer continues, "When we started, we only loosely had the idea of getting together and playing some music. It started that informally; just getting together and doing some picking and playing. Over a couple of month period, we started working on some original songs, as well as playing some covers that we thought would be fun to play."

Shortly thereafter, they took five songs from their budding repertoire into a studio and knocked out a demo in just two days. Their soon-to-be manager sent that demo to a few festivals, and – to the band's surprise – they were booked at the prestigious Telluride Bluegrass Festival before they'd even played their first gig. This prompted them to quickly go in and record five more songs; the ten combined tracks of which made up their debut album, "The Black Bear Sessions."

That was the beginning of Railroad Earth's journey: since those early days, they've gone on to release five more critically acclaimed studio albums and one hugely popular live one called, "Elko." They've also amassed a huge and loyal fanbase who turn up to support them in every corner of the country, and often take advantage of the band's liberal taping and photo policy. But Railroad Earth bristle at the notion of being lumped into any one "scene." Not out of animosity for any other artists: it's just that they don't find the labels very useful. As Carbone points out, "We use unique acoustic instrumentation, but we're definitely not a bluegrass or country band, which sometimes leaves music writers confused as to how to categorize us. We're essentially playing rock on acoustic instruments."

Ultimately, Railroad Earth's music is driven by the remarkable songs of front-man, Todd Sheaffer, and is delivered with seamless arrangements and superb musicianship courtesy of all six band members. As mandolin/bouzouki player John Skehan points out, "Our M.O. has always been that we can improvise all day long, but we only do it in service to the song. There are a lot of songs that, when we play them live, we adhere to the arrangement from the record. And other songs, in the nature and the spirit of the song, everyone knows we can kind of take flight on them." Sheaffer continues: "The songs are our focus, our focal point; it all starts right there. Anything else just comments on the songs and gives them color. Some songs are more open than others. They 'want' to be approached that way – where we can explore and trade musical ideas and open them up to different territories. But sometimes it is what the song is about."

So: they can jam with the best of them and they have some bluegrass influences, but they use drums and amplifiers (somewhat taboo in the bluegrass world). What kind of music is it then? Mandolin/vocalist John Skehan offers this semi-descriptive term: "I always describe it as a string band, but an amplified string band with drums." Tim Carbone takes a swing: "We're a Country & Eastern band!" Todd Sheaffer offers "A souped-up string band? I don't know. I'm not good at this." Or, as a great drummer/singer/mandolin player with an appreciation for Americana once said: "Rock & roll!"