

Mountain Highway Preserves Bluegrass Traditions

By Claudia Johnson

Mountain Highway is a family band that is preserving traditional bluegrass with performances throughout the country and a newly-released CD.

The group includes Victoria, 18, on banjo; Jack, 17, on guitar; Emily, 15, on mandolin; Rebekah, 13, on fiddle; and their dad, Joe, on upright bass. Jack is the lead singer on most songs, but the girls each have a song or two in which they sing lead during each performance. All four children sing harmony.

The teenagers are first generation musicians because neither Joe or their mom, Trish, played an instrument.

"Growing up, we heard lots of bluegrass music, because that's all our dad ever played on the radio," said Victoria. "But our musical journey really began when our parents took us to see Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder at a bluegrass festival in Pigeon Forge a little over a decade ago. After that, we were hooked on live bluegrass and began traveling often as a family to concerts and festivals."

The family most enjoyed attending concerts by the Cherryholmes family band and Dailey & Vincent. Later, they "devoured" YouTube videos of early bluegrass performed by musicians like Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys.

"It was Skip Cherryholmes who first made me want to play the guitar," Jack recalled. "When I finally did start playing, my greatest influence then became Tony Rice. Vocally, I've been greatly influenced by Lester Flatt."

A few years ago, while attending a music festival called "Houstonfest" in Galax, Virginia, the children picked up instruments for the first time in an "instrument petting zoo." Within a few weeks, they owned a couple of guitars and began learning chords and choosing harmony parts to sing. Eventually, they all learned to play an instrument, as did their father.

"We think the years we spent together attending bluegrass festivals gave us a love for the music and a passion for passing that experience on to others," Joe said. "None of us ever planned or expected any of this to happen, although we're really grateful to God that it did."

Most of what they learned about playing instruments came from video



Mountain Highway playing at Herbstock, the annual Labor Day party at the home of Lorrie Davis Bennett, daughter of Anita Carter.

instruction and other musicians on YouTube with some help from seasoned musicians at bluegrass jams in their region. For a while, they had the help of a classically trained vocal coach who taught them breathing techniques and dynamics.

"That experience took the fun of singing to a whole new level," Jack said.

As a band, the Mountain Highway members say they have been influenced most by the music of pioneers like Bill Monroe, Ralph and Carter Stanley and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. The present-day musicians that have had the greatest impact on them are Ricky Skaggs, the Cherryholmes family, Dailey & Vincent and Alison Krauss and Union Station.

"The first bluegrass concert we attended as a family was Ricky Skaggs," said Emily. "I was really little! I grew up listening to the mandolin picking of Ricky and Bill Monroe, and they now influence my mandolin playing a great deal."

Joe said his greatest influence vocally is Briscoe Darling. He's joking, of course, as fans of the Andy Griffith Show know Briscoe never sang. Instrumentally, Joe said his children influenced him more than any other musicians, because he never had ambitions of learning to play an instrument until his kids started playing and teaching him how to play, too.

"Growing up listening to the Cherryholmes, I always enjoyed hearing their banjo player Cia sing, so I also gravitated toward the banjo when it came to choosing my own instru-

ment," said Victoria. "Lately, I've also been vocally influenced by Alison Krauss. Of course, I can't leave out my most favorite banjo player of all time, Earl Scruggs."

Like her siblings, Rebekah also cites the Cherryholmes as major influences on her music.

"For as far back as I can remember, I loved watching BJ and Molly Cherryholmes of the Cherryholmes family band and Andy Leftwich of Kentucky Thunder play fiddle," said Rebekah. "Today, I also enjoy watching videos of the great Paul Warren with Flatt and Scruggs."

Joe and the children may be the only family members who perform, but mom Trish has the vital role of mixing sound at live performances.

"That's pretty important because nobody knows how to mix our live music like she does, and she does it well," said Rebekah. "She's got an ear for each of our voices and knows how to blend them when we're singing harmony."

Along with Victoria, Trish also maintains the group's social media platforms, which has garnered 40,000 followers. That means taking a lot of photos to create fresh content.

"You've heard of the paparazzi who follow musicians around taking their pictures?" Emily asked. "Well, we call our mom the 'mama-razzi,' because she follows us around and takes our pictures."

Because of their heavy performance schedule, the homeschooled children admit they have to work hard to keep from getting behind.

"Doing our school work year-round helps, but the 'grind' of traveling to perform is actually our favorite part of each week," said Emily. "We've had a blast traveling, meeting new people, and spending time with friends wherever we go. We enjoy our time at home, too, having the chance to relax, recharge and catch up on our studies."

Mountain Highway has released a CD that will appeal to those who grew up watching "Hee Haw" and "The Grand Ole Opry" and listened to

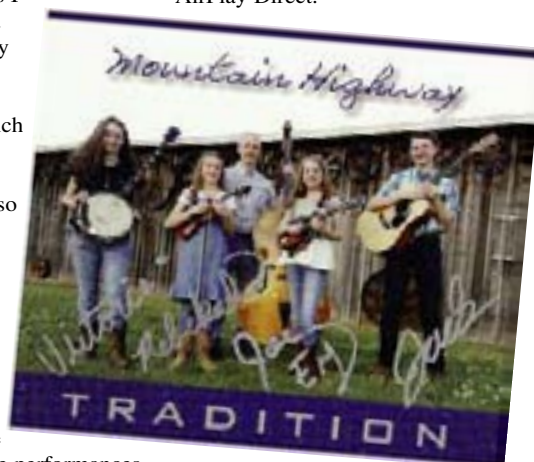
Monroe, Stanley and Flatt & Scruggs. In fact, the band's goal stated on the inside of the CD cover is "to perform traditional bluegrass music that transports people back to a time and place that they once knew and loved."

"We've been honored to have people tell us - some with chill bumps on their arms and tears in their eyes - that our music accomplished just that!" Victoria said.

In some instances, they've converted listeners to bluegrass.

"There've been many occasions when people have said they didn't like bluegrass music, but our show made them think maybe they actually do," Jack said. "That's humbling, and it excites us to know we can open people's hearts to the music that we love so much."

The CD called "Tradition" is a tribute to the pioneers of bluegrass. The first single released from the CD is the Stanley Brothers tune "Think of What You've Done." It's currently available to broadcasters through AirPlay Direct.



Mountain Highway included one of their favorite instrumentals written by Monroe called "Southern Flavor," along with one of his best bluegrass gospel numbers "A Voice From on High." A second gospel song on the CD is a Stanley tune called "Are You Afraid to Die?" Some other favorites included in the volume are "Your Love is Like a Flower," "Going to Georgia," "Down the Road" and "Man of Constant Sorrow." Physical copies of the CD can be ordered online at mountainhighway.com, while digital downloads are available on Amazon Music, Apple Music, iTunes and Spotify.

Mountain Highway is on tour performing music found on the "Tradition" CD in about a hundred venues in 10 states from Pennsylvania to Tennessee and Kentucky to Virginia. The children say they hold aspirations to play on stages like the Ryman Auditorium, the Lincoln Theater, the Carter Family Fold and others significant to the history of bluegrass and Country music.

"Our ultimate goal is to perform on the Grand Ole Opry, which is perhaps the greatest stage on which any musician can perform," said Victoria. "Of course, we would love to play on ANY stage with our favorite musician, Ricky Skaggs."



Left to right, Jack, Victoria, Emily, Rebekah, Trish, and Joe Glover