

NO DEPRESSION

THE ALTERNATIVE COUNTRY (WHATEVER THAT IS) BIMONTHLY

July – August 2007

REID BURGESS:

"Initially, we really aimed ourselves toward trying almost to put ourselves in that Bill Monroe era — intentionally pursued it. That was really fun, and we worked at it for a long time... But once we started letting other musical ideas and songs in, there was no stopping it."

by BARRY MAZOR

EVER SINCE THE release of King Wilkie's breakthrough disc *Broke* on Rebel Records three years ago, it has been very, very easy to encounter reviews and profiles celebrating the young band from Charlottesville, Virginia, for their energetic, back-to-basics approach to hard-driving, traditional bluegrass.

After all, aren't the boys named for Bill Monroe's horse? Don't they wear those dark, gentlemanly suits even in the middle of the summer, work a single mike with tight, late-'40s harmonies, stick to the classic instruments, and put the first-generation, genre-building songs up-front in their shows? Descriptions such as "the future of bluegrass" and "new kings of bluegrass" have been plastered on them — as has, with considerably more serious consideration, the IBMA's Emerging Artist of the Year award in 2004.

Heady stuff. But from the standpoint of the six band members, the very nature of the praise was becoming troubling.

"In the first two years," recalls John McDonald, who ably carries the smoother half of King Wilkie's lead vocal load, "when we were out cranking the traditional bluegrass stuff, and playing covers written in that style, the most common comment made afterward would be from some older gentleman who'd come up to the table, stick his hand out, and say, 'Man, it means a lot to have young guys like you playing this music and showing respect for this music that I've loved all my life.' And that was great. Then, at the end of the conversation, they'd look you right in the eye and say, 'Keep doing what you're doing!' Which was cool, and made you feel really validated — at the beginning."

If the well-intentioned gentlemen had been paying just a little closer attention, they could have noticed that there was also, from the very start, a certain amount of shaking of that traditional bluegrass framework going on.

Reid Burgess, the band's other, more gravelly, lead singer — and, along with co-founder Ted Pitney, one of its central songwriters — was already pointing out the occasional Neil Young harmonies and updated lyric themes on *Broke* when writer Danielle Dreilinger first profiled the band in these pages in July 2004. And Reid was emphasizing, even then, how the personal stories of the sextet inevitably set their resulting sounds apart, however tradition-oriented they'd worked to be.

The King Wilkie boys, coming from diverse musical back-

grounds, had discovered the territory in a few intense, fruitful years after college, a story quite different from those of traditional bluegrassers who've spent a lifetime digesting the music, raised in its native style. Their original songwriting, more and more noticeably, came to reflect that difference — and there were still those congratulating them for sticking to somebody else's knitting.

"Yeah; guys would still come up and say that same thing," McDonald reflects. "While I'd still appreciate it, I was also thinking, 'Hmm — but did you really hear it?' So 'Just keep doin' what you're doin', son' started to feel a little claustrophobic."

As it happens, on the new King Wilkie CD *Low Country Suite* (released June 26 on Zoe/Rounder), there's no straightforward, traditional bluegrass to be heard, at all. All eleven songs are band-written originals, with very varied tones, often harmonious in non-traditional ways. At times they're in a very contemporary acoustic Americana mode, often reflecting the more rural end of late-'60s/early-'70s rock, with Byrds/Burritos/Band/Neil Young/Leonard Cohen influences showing. The sounds venture as far as Burgess' frisky "Ms. Peabody", played in sheer raccoon coat '20s vaudeville style — one more example, apparently, of the lasting influence of "The Muppet Show" and "Sesame Street" vaudeville on contemporary music.

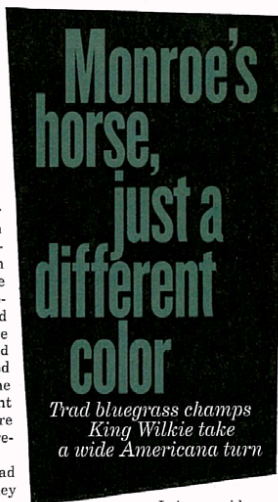
To produce *Low Country Suite*, King Wilkie chose Jim Scott, famed as the engineer on the Rick Rubin sessions with Johnny Cash, and for his engineering and producing work with everyone from the Red Hot Chili Peppers to the Dixie Chicks. Scott brought with him a grab-bag of additional instrumental sounds that appear on the recording — a toy piano, that 19th-century autoharp-meets-hammered-dulcimer contraption the Marxophone, and even a few bits of percussion and electric guitar. Greg

Leisz provides some pedal steel and slide guitar.

It's also notable that *Low Country Suite* finds the band jumping from the traditionalist Rebel Records label to the broad-ranging Rounder collective — and the indie/edgy Zoe wing of Rounder at that (home of Kathleen Edwards, Cowboy Junkies and the Damnells, among others).

King Wilkie's established fans — even those who may have picked up on the earlier implied attraction to varied musical styles — and newcomers who have heard only descriptions of

King Wilkie (clockwise from left) Nick Reeb, Ted Pitney, Jake Hopping, Abe Spear, Reid Burgess, and John MacDonald, photographed in New York City by Aldo Mauro.





their previous work are bound to be taken by surprise.

"This record does go to some very odd places and takes a lot of chances," Burgess agrees, "but a lot of that is just about making a second record. It would be impossible for this band to get the same kind of excitement for a second record as the first one, so we were kind of able to move around the drudgery of that by making a record that seemed like a first one." (They seem not to count their 2003 debut, *True Songs*.)

Don't let that itch to keep things spanking-new fool you, though. No one would mistake King Wilkie's members for potential stars of Short Attention Span Theater. All six of them — Burgess, on keyboards now as well as mandolin; McDonald, on guitar; Pitney, on lead guitar; Nick Reeb, on violin (formerly listed as "fiddle"); Abe Spear, on banjo; and Jake Hopping, previously with midwest jam-grassers the Spud Puppies, the newcomer on bass — spent years honing their traditional bluegrass knowledge and prowess. They had achieved growing acclaim for it, and forged their sense of themselves as a group in the process.

Pitney came in from jazz but also had been in rock bands, as had Burgess and McDonald. In addition, Pitney and Burgess had led what they tend to think of now as a "trying to sort of play bluegrass band" called Captain Catastrophe, before King Wilkie came together at Ohio's Kenyon College.

"And now," says Burgess, "we're sort of letting everything back in."

The decision to let that happen came in stages. The opening track, "The Raising Of The Patriarchs", co-written by Burgess and Pitney, is an example of a song that was transformed during the process. The band points with particular satisfaction to how it emerged as a reflective, spookily echoing ballad that speaks of, among other things, traveling a long

way to find calm. To create its setting, they had to rethink the very elements that would have been more or less a given had it felt appropriate for a bluegrass treatment.

"That was kind of a milestone for us, something really unique when it was complete" says Burgess. "It's funny, because I had that song two years before we recorded it, but it wasn't



King Wilkie in New York City.

really working. So when, all of a sudden, we found a way to make it work, it was very satisfying.

"It started out very whispery, like a folk ballad with harmonies all the way through it; we were trying to spin it that way. It was just weak; the song didn't have balls. We'd always tried to get this 'one voice' harmony thing...but we figured out how to approach the phrasing and the harmonies so that it *wasn't* one voice. Instead of trying to melt together, Johnny and I both go do our own distinct thing.

"That came to us only after we'd done 'Wrecking Ball' and 'Angeline' — doing those songs helped us connect the dots," Reid continues, referring to two catchy, acoustic rock-like tracks on the album that could, in Americana terms, virtually be singles. "We'd found more of our own individual voices again — and answered the question of where to put the bass notes.... We didn't *want* the arrangement to fill everything in from the beginning."

Letting each song find its own way, outside the demands of any particular genre (like that choice of looser harmonies reminiscent of The Band, when needed), was, in real ways, a pretty gutsy departure from

what had become King Wilkie's comfort zone.

"We'd all been speaking the same language, which made it easy to put songs together," McDonald recalls. "I mean, it wasn't easy *technically*; that part's hard. But it was cool to have a format to work in, parameters to make things a little easier, to work within."

"It's also tough writing bluegrass songs," Burgess adds. "You're forced to be creative, because there are these little limits and rules for working the genre. But for us, at least for me, it wasn't really *personal* enough."

And so, rather than writing songs like the *Broke* track "Lee & Paige" — which is quite original in its own way (a young man grabs his girlfriend just in time to die with her as she's hit by a train) — they've come up with songs in which jet planes go by, modern women present the love life complications, and the experiences raised in the stories are slightly more likely to have happened to them.

"It's hard writing about stuff that has never happened to you, ever," Burgess acknowledges, "unless you just work in the abstract, and I guess that's another way to go. Initially, we really aimed ourselves toward trying almost to put ourselves in that Bill Monroe era — intentionally pursued it. That was really fun, and we worked at it for a long time. It was what we were doing best for a while. But once we started letting other musical ideas and songs in, there was no stopping it."

And so, this one took a while to bring home. *Low Country Suite* has been, in effect, three years in the making; it's a considerable departure even from the limited-release EP *Tierra Del Fuego* that they put out themselves in 2005 as a sort of halfway stop between the two sounds. By now, the more freeform place outside of the band's practiced arena seems to its members like a new sort of comfort zone itself.

"For the most part, it seems now like there was a lot more anxiety with the *first* record, about arriving with precision at a sound; it was such a stylized thing," Burgess says. "Part


of that, I'm sure, was also that we were quitting our jobs; this is not a hobby, so there was a lot of insecurity. ... Here, it was a lot more natural; we were just letting things come as they came. Not trying to be so cohesive."

This is a band made up of — they all agree — opinionated guys with "if it's this, it's not that" tendencies. Which is one reason they were initially attracted to the hard-defined, nothing-vague traditional bluegrass vein rather than the somewhat more flexible contemporary or newgrass subgenres to begin with. But that doesn't mean King Wilkie 2.0 is some final, locked version either.

"This is an evolution," McDonald says. "My favorite bands are those that evolve, with each album different — Wilco, for example. I got really into their *Being There* album when I was in high school — which was all over the map *then*, but each one of their records has been different, which is why they have been exciting to wait for."

And — rather touchingly in an era when so many performers feel the need to underscore a new direction or sound by blasting their previous favorite — King Wilkie has continued to include the bluegrass material in their live sets, even as they've slowly worked newer material into their old repertoire. They have only good things to say about the bluegrass scene, the festivals, most of the people, the life.

So far, they've been gratified to find much of their audience receptive to the move they've made. They also understand very well that others won't be so taken with it. But they know how basic the bluegrass discipline has been to their identity as a group.

"We have a lot of the same tastes, after all," McDonald says. "You won't hear a lot of flashy stuff now — because we never were drawn to that. Everything we do today is still filtered through the band that we were when we were playing more traditional music. That's an absolute part of our DNA." 

ND senior editor Barry Mazor is very fond of bluegrass. He is fond of a lot of other things, too.

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/94945-king-wilkie-the-wilkie-family-singers/>

King Wilkie Presents: The Wilkie Family Singers

(Casa Nueva)

UK release date: 25 May 2009

By [Juli Thanki](#)

King Wilkie may have borrowed their name from Bill Monroe's horse, but that's about all they have in common with the father of bluegrass on their newest album, released on the fledgling Casa Nueva label. The staid Monroe would never have created a concept album about a family band receiving therapy, for example. But while bluegrass purists may turn up their nose at King Wilkie's most recent incarnation, folkies, alt-country enthusiasts, and fans of 1960s and '70s singer-songwriters might just fall in love with this project as the Wilkie Family channels Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Simon & Garfunkel, the Beatles, and other masters of pop.

Though King Wilkie was a rather traditional bluegrass band at the time of their first release, 2004's *Broke*, they began experimenting with their sound almost immediately, resulting in 2007's *Low Country Suite*. But following *LCS* the band experienced a spate of personnel changes, leaving frontman Reid Burgess to regroup and reinvent once more. Hence this new venture, which is unlike anything King Wilkie has done.

The Wilkie Family Singers are a 14-person band, featuring the shipping magnate patriarch, his six adult children (who are still living at home), some cousins, a cat, a parrot, a neighbor, a family friend, and, of course, Dr. Art, the family's therapist/occasional pianist. If this is starting to sound like the indie movie flavor of the month, rest assured that there is no concrete storyline on the album, nor any guest appearances from bedheaded hipster heartthrobs. Instead, it's a collection of songs briefly illuminating parts of the Wilkie Family's back story, from unrequited love to Dr. Art's mad therapy skills ("I was a monkey and couldn't evolve / I saw Dr. Art and now my problems are solved / Oh yeah"), bookended by two catchy companion tracks, "Moon and Sun" and "Sun and Moon", set to various low-key acoustic instruments (from fiddle to the rare appearance of Santo and Johnny-influenced steel guitar, rare perhaps because half-brother and steel player J.R. Wilkie is "generally regarded as lazy and unproductive").

King Wilkie should be commended for the lengths they've gone to in order to give this project a sense of realism, including detailed MySpace pages for each fictional band member (human and non) as well as elaborately concocted back stories. (An example: Walt, born autistic and with perfect pitch, occasionally plays harmonica in the family band when not memorizing baseball statistics or railroad schedules. He also keeps the home's four pianos in tune.) Their large stable of A-list guest stars, including John McEuen, Abigail Washburn, Sam Parton (The Be Good Tanyas), Robyn Hitchcock, and Peter Rowan, are more than willing to take on the personas of their characters, weaving in and out of the album like family members dropping by the family home unannounced. There's a fine line between a clever concept album and a collection of overly precious navel-gazing. Luckily the Wilkie Family Singers stay firmly within the bounds of the former, resulting in 2009's most inventive and enjoyable alt-country album to date.

Lead Critic's Pick – *The Boston Globe*, May 3, 2009

http://www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2009/05/03/critics_picks__pop_music/

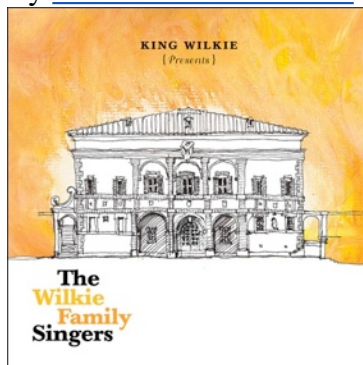
“It may be, as they claim, a concept record about a dysfunctional family and art therapy, but it's also a tuneful blend of Americana, bluegrass, and pure pop.”

Review – *The Boston Phoenix*, April 30, 2009 (also ran in the Portland Phoenix and the Providence Phoenix)

“Two earlier albums made them rising young stars of bluegrass; these 12 songs throw their high-and-lonesome sound away for something enjoyably strange, free-ranging, and mysterious.”

<http://thephoenix.com/Boston/Music/81556-King-Wilkie-King-Wilkie-Presents-The-Wilkie-Fam/>

By **[TED DROZDOWSKI](#)** | April 28, 2009 |



Today, "risk" is less popular than George W. Bush, but this former Virginia band — now in NYC — are rolling the dice hard. Two earlier albums made them rising young stars of bluegrass; these 12 songs throw their high-and-lonesome sound away for something enjoyably strange, free-ranging, and mysterious.

If there's a doppelgänger for this concept disc, it's the Black Keys' *Attack and Release*, which likewise careered from blues to pop to folk to psychedelia. "Goodbye Rose" has a Beatles-esque horn section; "Dr. Art" — about a Dr. Feelgood character — burbles with New Orleans clarinet; "Slow Water" blends dobro, violin, and howling singing in a mountain lament.

Group founder Reid Burgess's tenor voice makes wistful these songs about love, the heavens, and ties inspired by the mythical Wilkie family's saga. And a guest list that includes folk legend Peter Rowan, Robyn Hitchcock, and David Bromberg aids his effort to reinvent the band.

Billboard

June 30, 2007

BLUEGRASS

KING WILKIE

Low Country Suite

Producer: *Jim Scott*

Zoe/Rounder

Release Date: *June 26*



After two years of touring in support of 2004's "Broke," bluegrass traditionalist act King Wilkie found renewed inspiration listening to country rock and the sounds of Nick Drake, Nico and Leonard Cohen. The Virginia sextet hasn't abandoned its roots, as evidenced by the straight-up bluegrass of "Wrecking Ball," but it has embraced a more sophisticated and introspective approach with "Low Country Suite." Songwriters Reid Burgess, John McDonald and Ted Pitney explore their dark sides on lovely, melancholy tracks like "Oh My Love" and "The Raising of the Patriarchs." And while "Broke" bursts with the raw energy of banjo and mandolin, the material here unfurls more deliberately. Relaxed charmers "Angeline" and "Captivator" demonstrate how adeptly King Wilkie has fused elements of country rock, pop and folk to achieve a sound a wider audience can appreciate.—AC

TOLEDO FREE PRESS

www.toledofreepress.com/2009/09/04/king-wilkie-to-ride-into-ann-arbor/

King Wilkie to ride into Ann Arbor

Written by Vicki L. Kroll | | news@toledofreepress.com

“King Wilkie Presents: The Wilkie Family Singers” features Togo the cat on drums and Symbaline the parrot on vocals. OK, not really. The third disc by the band that won the 2004 International Bluegrass Music Association’s Emerging Artist of the Year Award features fictional family members and friends — and two pets — that live in a big house.

“I wanted to do something about a family, sort of musical people and their odd development together; it’s just more of the backslash for the album,” said Reid Burgess, singer-songwriter and founding member of King Wilkie. “A lot of the songs thematically to me had this sense of a fantasy world, but, ultimately, [the concept] was to tie all of the songs together because the album has a lot of zigzagging stylistically.

“There’s a lot of different kinds of songs, and I didn’t know how they all made sense together, so that was a technique to try to string it together.”

Burgess has been stringing musicians together to keep the group going. King Wilkie’s 2004 debut, “Broke,” was bluegrass, but its 2007 follow-up, “Low Country Suite,” was more eclectic. The original members split for a variety of reasons.

Guests on the new disc include John McEuen of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Sam Parton of Be Good Tanyas and Robyn Hitchcock.

“[Our music is] still largely acoustic, more of a folk Americana meets almost like Vaudeville kind of stuff,” Burgess explained from his Brooklyn home during a phone interview.

Fear not, fans of the band named after bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe’s horse. There’s still plenty of old-timey fiddles and banjos, with a touch of brass and whimsy.

“I’m not a real serious lyricist or anything,” Burgess said. “I like to sit at the piano or guitar and kind of just moan and groan into a tape recorder, and then little words, little lyrics come out of that.”

Burgess will bring King Wilkie — bassist Jay Foote, guitarist and pianist Steve Lewis, multi-instrumentalist Dennis Lichtman, and guitarist and banjoist Phill Saylor — to The Ark in Ann Arbor for an 8 p.m. show, Sept. 10. Tickets are \$15. Doors open at 7:30 p.m. Casey Driessen and the Colorfools will open.

<http://smokingowl.blogspot.com/2009/08/that-huge-thud-you-just-heard-wasbob.html>

Friday, August 7, 2009

That huge thud you just heard was...Bob Dylan and Neil Young getting donkey kicked in the balls

I am going to violate the whole purpose of this blog for what I consider to big news.

I, just one humble soul in the middle of nowhere, believes deeply and personally that the penultimate folk/rock/singer-songwriter masterminds ass kickers of all time just lost their title.

What you say? Bob Dylan's still doing his never ending tour, Neil Young made it through the health scare, and both of their most recent albums were good if not really pretty damned good (arguable, but I will let it slide), and they were not just retreading of old material. They are fresh you say, true; never felt better, sure, never sounded better, uhm lets be honest their recordings never sounded better, but the tape don't lie . And (and this is important) if you want to be the best you have to be the best all the time and these two titans have tripped; or maybe they have been tripped; but it's over. They are far closer to being what Fleetwood Mac and other classic titans are now than what I want them to be to keep the title of bad ass creative spirit of the music worlds.

There is a new generation and what they are doing now is better than what Bob and Neil are doing with their fantastic bands now and at some level that is all that counts. And here is kicker, unlike the Phish vs Grateful Dead argument; it is not one band. It's a whole generation of folks that have chopped down these remaining two redwoods and let them turn themselves into totem poles honoring what once was.

I won't begin to review the albums, it's already been done by those better at it than me and I don't want to ruin the raw joy of hearing something great being done. Please trust me, check these out online and then buy the album if you like what you hear. Reward greatness with your hard earned buck. If your quick, you may still be able to say, I heard these guys before they hit it really big and even if they don't; you can impress someone who's taste matters to you.

Oh yeah, These guys used to be a badass Bluegrass band; now they are doing this. With Bluegrass pioneer Peter Rowan in tow and ...it's a concept album. What the hell is going on here? Pay attention to the brilliant bookending of song choice. Genius, Genius.
King Wilkie - King Wilkie Presents- The Wilkie Family Singers

SlipCue.com, June 2009

"An enchanting mix of styles, casually mixing alt-twang, boozy jug-band singalongs and art-song indierock...Creative and catchy, this record is packed



with oddly appealing tunes."

<http://slipcue.com/music/country/new/2009/>

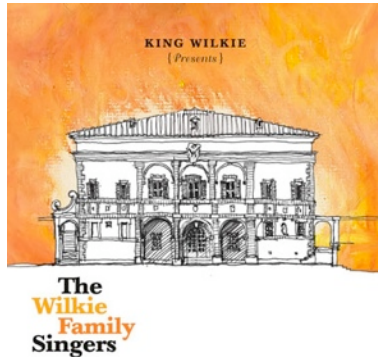
King Wilkie
"King Wilkie Presents: The Wilkie Family Singers" (Casa Nueva, 2009)
(Produced by Reid Burgess & Steve Lewis)

An enchanting mix of styles,

casually mixing alt-twang, boozy jug-band singalongs and art-song indierock. The first couple of tracks set the template, opening with an episodic country-harmony ditty ("Moon And Sun") that recalls the hippie-era hillbilly forays of the Byrds, a tune that gives way to "Goodbye Rose," a sweet song that sounds, for all the world, like an outtake from John Cale's *Paris 1919* album; there's a hint of The Band in there as well. Numerous high-power guests appear, including Peter Rowan, Abigail Washburn, Robyn Hitchcock and John McEuen. To be totally fair, I guess it'd be more accurate to class this as a rock album than as a twang set, but either way it's quite nice. Creative and catchy, this record is packed with oddly appealing tunes. Definitely worth checking out.

Hyperbolium.com, May 18, 2009

King Wilkie: King Wilkie Presents- The Wilkie Family Singers



Audacious pop concept by former bluegrass wunderkind

If you caught King Wilkie's bluegrass debut [Broke](#), and somehow managed to miss their break with orthodoxy on 2007's [Low Country Suite](#), you're in for a really big surprise. With the original group disbanded, and founding member Reid Burgess relocated to New York City, the band's name has been redeployed as the front for this stylistically zig-zagging concept album. The Wilkie Family Singers are an imagined co-habiting, musically-inclined family fathered by shipping magnate Jude Russell Wilkie, and filled out by a wife, six children, a cousin, two friends and two pets.

In reality the assembled group includes Burgess, longtime collaborator John McDonald, multi-instrumentalist Steve Lewis, and guest appearances by Peter Rowan, David Bromberg, John McEuen, Robyn Hitchcock, Abigail Washburn and Sam Parton. And rather than constructing a storyline or song-cycle, Burgess wrote songs that give expression to the family's life and backstory. As he explains, "Jude Russell Wilkie, Sr. had success with a Great Lakes shipping business, and becomes the father to a great family, whose normal familial roles aren't neatly defined as they grow older. Their insular lifestyle and wealth has them in a sort of time warp. They're wedged in limbo between past and future. Too big to hold mom's hand or ride on dad's shoulders, but still somehow too small to leave their childhood house."

Much as the Beatles used Sgt. Pepper as a backdrop to inform the mood of [Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band](#), Burgess works from his sketch to conjure a family photo album rather than a written history. There are snapshots of togetherness, isolation, and stolen moments of solitary time, there's lovesick pining, unrequited longing for the larger world, lives stunted in adolescence, violent dreams and medicinal coping. The band ranges over an impressive variety of styles that include acoustic country, blues and folk, rustic Americana, Dixieland jazz, '50s-tinged throwbacks and '70s-styled production pop. There's even some back-porch picking here, but this edition of King Wilkie has much grander ambitions than to embroider the bluegrass handed down by Bill Monroe. The festival circuit's loss is pop music's gain.

Burgess paints the family as lyrical motifs and musical colors rather than descriptive profiles. The latter might have been more immediately satisfying but would have quickly turned stagey. Instead, the family's dynamic is spelled out in small pieces, fitting the broad range of musical styles to create an album that plays beautifully from beginning to end. The songs stand on their own, but the family's presence is felt in the flow of the album's tracks. Casa Nueva hits a homerun with their maiden release, and King Wilkie proves itself a daring band whose next step should be highly anticipated.

<http://lonesomeroadreview.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/king-wilkie-presents-the-wilkie-family-singers-by-king-wilkie/>

July 26, 2009 by [lonesomeroadreview](#)

[King Wilkie Presents: The Wilkie Family Singers](#)

Casa Nueva Records

Named for Bill Monroe's favorite horse, King Wilkie made a spectacular traditional bluegrass album *Broke* in 2004 and was rewarded with the Emerging Artist of the Year award from the International Bluegrass Music Association.

In 2007, the Charlottesville sextet expanded their sound and turned in the near-masterpiece acoustic country-rock *Low Country Suite*.

By 2008, however, the group had all but disbanded, leaving singer, songwriter, mandolinist and multi-instrumentalist Reid Burgess in possession of the band's name and, apparently, a head full of ideas that ran even further afield than *Low Country Suite*.

"Moon and Sun," a loose sing-along featuring Burgess, guitarist Steve Lewis and guest Abigail Washburn, is an appropriately collegial kick-off for a disc entitled *The Wilkie Family Singers*.

It gives way to "Goodbye Rose," a Beatle-esque tune with Burgess on yearning lead vocal and bouncy piano, which in turn leads into the Pet Sounds-influenced "Videotape," which features guest backing vocals and guitar from Robyn Hitchcock.

"Same Water" is a gritty, bluesy interlude from Lewis and guest David Bromberg on slide guitar before a return to Burgess' pop experiments, namely the 1950s-style love ballad "Sweet Dreams" and the sweet "Symbaline," which sounds like something the Kinks could have done in a gentler moment.

No one sings a mournful song quite like Peter Rowan, who makes Burgess' "Railroad Town" the most emotional song on the CD.

Lewis and Bromberg are back on the rustic "Hey Old Man" before Burgess takes us back to the 1960s with the "Yellow Submarine"-like drug song "Dr. Art."

"Orange Creme Houses" is another gorgeous piano ballad from Burgess, and a perfect set-up for Lewis' anthemic "Take It Underground," the project's most memorable track.

The album ends with "Sun and Moon," a book-end to the opening track with the addition of John McEuen on banjo.

Though there's a lot going on here, it all hangs together in a strange way and is a fine album to accompany a lonely Saturday afternoon or even a Wes Anderson movie. And it's certainly good enough to make you want to hear what else Burgess, Lewis and friends can come up with.

Music

With hot new acts, bluegrass has the blues beat

By Steve Morse
GLOBE STAFF



Bluegrass veteran Ricky Skaggs (left) and popular newcomers King Wilkie appreciate the honesty and authenticity of the music, and so do fans.



When young bluegrass stars the Johnson Mountain Boys broke up in the early '90s, they bemoaned the fact that bluegrass was in much less healthy shape — commercially speaking — than the blues. If they only knew what lay ahead, maybe they would have stayed together.

Since then, the two genres have gone in different directions — bluegrass to the top of the mountain, blues to the bottom.

Bluegrass has forged new stars from Alison Krauss to Nickel Creek and King Wilkie, who'll play the Joe Val Bluegrass Festival at the Sheraton Framingham Hotel tomorrow. But the blues has not sustained new talent — something that's hard to do when blues clubs are closing their doors, whether it's the House of Blues in Cambridge or the Yardrock in Quincy.

"The drive and rhythm of bluegrass
BLUEGRASS, Page C12

Bluegrass is hitting high notes while the blues languishes

BLUEGRASS

Continued from Page C10

"It was an instant hook for me," says King Wilkie's Ted Reid, a 20-something picker who fell in love with music when backpacking around Australia with a pile of bluegrass tapes. He and bandmate Reid attended Kenyon College in Ohio, where they turned the radio dial to find something different — bluegrass.

"There's a swing to it, it's organic, and it's a far cry from the industrial pop and rock that is out there," says Pitney, whose group recently topped the charts in *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine.

Clearly, bluegrass also received a bigger boost from the success of the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack (which has sold close to 7 million copies) and "Cold Mountain" soundtrack than the blues did from Martin Scorsese's PBS documentary series "The Blues," two years ago. But that only tells half the story. The rest is that bluegrass is now perceived as cool and hip, while the blues is often viewed as old-fashioned.

"Years ago, bluegrass had more of a hay-bale image, but the level of sophistication has gone up dra-

matically," says Ken Irwin, co-owner of Cambridge-based Rounder Records. His label has seen bluegrass sales shoot up (Krauss and her band Union Station sold 70,000 copies of their last album in its first week of release), while sales of blues albums rarely surpass 20,000 copies.

"Blues records are selling 20 percent of what they were in the late '80s and '90s," says Rounder vice president Scott Billington.

"I played in a lot of rock bands and was a music major in college and focused on jazz," says King Wilkie's Pitney. "But bluegrass grabbed me. And we don't want to pretend that we're Bill Monroe [the father of bluegrass] back in 1946. We want to translate it into our own time and voice."

That's what Ricky Skaggs — who won this week's Grammy for best bluegrass album — has been doing for years. Skaggs and his band Kentucky Thunder also perform at the Joe Val festival tomorrow. "I'm 50 years old. If I were 50 in country music, they'd be

putting me out to pasture. But in bluegrass, you cross into 'legend' status," Skaggs says with a laugh. "Not that I'm putting myself in that category."

As commercial country music has become more about airbrushed artists and less about artistry, people have gravitated toward bluegrass, Skaggs says.

"Country has been losing its center and is looking more toward pop and VH1," he says. "It's more about looking great on camera than it is about music. . . . But with bluegrass, in order to survive you have to be good. There's a higher talent level."

Bluegrass also hark's back to a simpler time and stresses honesty in the music — something in short supply with much pop and mainstream country.

"It's totally different from any homogenized music scene," says Gerry Katz, president of the Boston Bluegrass Union, which booked the Joe Val event. "I'm a Jewish boy from Newton, but the emotion of the music and the three-part vocal harmonies really touched

me." Boston has its own bluegrass legend in the late Joe Val. He was the leader of the Charles River Valley Boys in the '60s, and besides having a world-class tenor or appropriate to the genre's high, lonesome sound, he helped point the music in a progressive direction.

Meanwhile, the blues world is foundering. "The blues is in a rut. There's no doubt about it," says Rounder's Billington. "I think it's going to take the right artist to fan the embers again." He hopes that Corey Harris — a star of the Scorsese blues series — may be the one. Harris's next album comes out this spring on Rounder.

Richard "Rostie" Rosenblatt, owner of Tone-Cool Records, which discovered a young Susan Tedeschi in the '90s, agrees. Tone-Cool just released CDs by Chicago blues veteran Hubert Sumlin and young Atlanta hotshot Sean Costello.

"Costello may be the breath of fresh air the blues industry needs," says Rosenblatt. The public can judge for itself on March 4, when Costello plays Johnny D's and Sumlin is at the Regattabar. "We need something that's new and real."

Some tickets to the Joe Val Bluegrass Festival at the Sheraton Framingham are still available. Check the Boston Bluegrass Union website at www.bbu.org for details or call 617-782-2251.

Performing Songwriter

Be Heard

July – August 2007



King Wilkie *Low Country Suite*

[Rounder]

With *Low Country Suite*, King Wilkie no longer seem out to prove their bluegrass bona fides through old-timey picking and high-lonesome harmonies. While they seeded their last disc *Broke* with old-school covers (Jimmie Rodgers, Jimmie Davis, the Monroe Brothers), their Rounder debut comes fully stocked with originals. They retain a bucolic vibe but strike a more gentle Americana groove. Ruminative relationship tunes like "Millie's Song," "Savannah" and "Crazy Daisy" suggest a cross-pollination of the Byrds' *Rodeo* days with the Band's "Dixie" nights. Their longtime bluegrass fans will enjoy the violin-fueled "Wrecking Ball," and "Angeline" is a front-porch foot stomper. The jaunty, jazzy "Ms. Peabody," about a Mrs. Robinson-like hotel encounter, offers a notable change of pace. *Low Country Suite* finds King Wilkie at the crossroads—walking away from bluegrass traditionalism and exploring new, yet still acoustic-based, musical ground. It'll be interesting to see where the future takes them. —MB

American★ songwriter

July/August 2007



KING WILKIE *Low Country Suite* (ZOE/ROUNDER) ★ ★ ★

King Wilkie sounds comfortably at home in the neo-traditionalist digs of its Rounder debut. Rooted in bluegrass and infused with breezy pop overtones, it's a solid and cohesive album that's both instantly familiar and refreshingly modern. Credit producer Jim Scott (Tom Petty, Dixie Chicks, Wilco) with this balancing act. Where King Wilkie's earlier efforts suffered from the barn-burning enthusiasm of young pickers raring to let loose, *Low Country Suite* relishes in a relaxed pace that allows breathing room for lush vocal harmonies, just-the-right-touches of instrumentation, and understated imagery. This combination works to its greatest advantage on tracks such as "The Raising of the Patriarchs" and "Angeline," which seamlessly build to mid-tempo grooves. Maudlin ballads such as "Millie's Song" don't ring as true. But, on the whole, King Wilkie walks the line rather well.—TOM WILMES

The Boston Globe Calendar

May 24, 2007

BLUEGRASS 5.24

KING WILKIE Though King Wilkie's spring tour opening for Mary Chapin Carpenter is off (she recently canceled the rest of her US tour), the band has several live dates ahead of the release of its second album, "Low Country Suite," due June 26 on Rounder. Billed as "An Evening With King Wilkie," tonight's free show at the Lizard Lounge will feature the young six-piece bluegrass outfit (left) playing old favorites and perhaps some new ones. The Virginia-based group returns to Boston in July as part of a summer tour, but catching them in this intimate setting is a real treat. *Lizard Lounge, 1667 Mass. Ave., Cambridge. 617-547-0759. 8 p.m. No cover. lizardloungeclub.com*

LINDA LABAN



Vintage Guitar[®] m a g a z i n e



King Wilkie

Broke

Rebel Records

Bluegrass bands can be divided along generational lines. You can listen to old-timers like Ralph Stanley, established

King Wilkie consists of Drew Breakey on bass, Reid Burgess on mandolin and vocals, John McDonald on guitar and vocals, Ted Pitney on lead guitar and vocals, Nick Reeb on fiddle, and Abe Spear on banjo. The songs on the album include standards such as "Blue Yodel #7" and "Little Birdie," as well as original songs by Burgess and Pitney. The best original, "All Night Blues," has the drive of a classic Flatt and Scruggs arrangement, due in no small part to the powerful banjo playing. The hot fiddle work combined with a precise mandolin solo and fine harmony singing complete this special delivery musical package.

On covers such as "Blue Yodel #7" the band maintains the spirit of the original while providing an extra dollop of youthful drive.

pros like Del McCoury, and young turks like King Wilkie.

With no one in the band over the age of 26, this Virginia-based band creates music combining bluegrass drive and attitude with contemporary sensibilities. On their first Rebel records release, King Wilkie (the name of Bill Monroe's favorite horse,) provide ample evidence that traditional bluegrass will survive well into the middle of this century.

Production values rival anything from far more established bands. Producer Bob Carlin and engineer John Plymale deliver a refined-yet-alive sound that presents King Wilkie in an ideal sonic light. Even during moments of frenzied picking, the sound remains clear and articulate. David Glasser, the master at Airshow Mastering, put the finishing touches on this CD. His work is almost like a Betty Crocker seal of sonic approval on a project: once a disc has gone through his ministrations it's always perfectly done.

I'm looking forward to seeing King Wilkie this summer on the festival circuit. Their first album promises great things for this young, vibrant bluegrass band. — SS

OKKERVIL RIVER

THE STAGE NAMES
(JAGJAGUWAR) www.jagjaguwar.com
A poetic tour de force



It's just a bad movie, where there's no cryin'," croons Will Sheff on the opening track of Okkervil River's fourth release. *The Stage Names* is hardly that, playing more like a film with vignettes of characters floating melancholically through the grittiest parts of the entertainment world. But *Stage* is no downer, instead taking you on a high-speed romp through the broken-down and dark places with just enough strut and swagger to keep the album from getting too gloomy. With reverb-soaked vocals and punchy, distressed guitar riffs, this has all the makings of a classic indie-rock stomper, with a few bonuses: the country-tinged "A Girl in Port," saddle-shoes and poodle-skirts era "You Can't Hold the Hand of the Rock and Roll Man" and music-box heartbreaker "Savannah Smiles."



Okkervil River

Taken as a whole or as a series of engrossing tales, *The Stage Names* is a poetic tour de force with both the modesty and sonic polish of a band in its prime. **ALLIE GOODRICK**

KING WILKIE

LOW COUNTRY SUITE
(ZOE/ROUNDER) www.zoerecords.net
A forward-looking kind of 'twang



On its sophomore outing, Virginia's King Wilkie manages to avoid all the pitfalls and hoary clichés that can bury lesser bands of the acoustic/country genre. Respectfully honoring great country traditions, the group still manages to be true to itself and to remain free to roam musically and lyrically. Also, the members avoid becoming too cloyingly earnest. Along with support from the likes of



King Wilkie

the ubiquitous Greg Leisz, the band never shows off its bluegrass chops or wastes time dragging out shopworn warhorses of country music to establish its roots cred. There are hints of Dylan with The Band, a nod to Alison Krauss, and echoes of those who have come before, but overall the group has its own unique sound. On a song like "Savannah," which someone will cover with great success, the group proves that above all, it has got the material to match the talent.

STEVE MATTEO

KT TUNSTALL

DRASTIC FANTASTIC
(RELENTLESS/VIRGIN)
www.virginrecords.com
Something in the way she quavers



KT Tunstall isn't just an occasionally wily songwriter who provided *American Idol* never-was Katherine McPhee with her career's finest moment (a thumping "Black Horse and the Cherry Tree"). The she-Scot has a ruminative, blousy approach to song craft (not to mention a killer lower octave) that makes even her mumsiest moments striking. The quietude of "White Bird" and its tepid acoustic guitar's slide could've been as pale as its subject. Same thing happens within the coolly limpid, grungy atmospheres of "Funnyman." Yet, there's something in Tunstall's quavering chord shifts and her low-down singing of such that saves her. It happens on the swooshing rush of

"Little Favours," where what could've been nothing but an emotional push-me-pull-you—the likes of which we'd get from Sheryl Crow—results in a bell-toned vocal's sarcastic sneer once heard from the magnificent Kirsty MacColl. KT's no Kirsty. Yet. But here's cheers for trying. **A.D. AMOROSI**

TURBONEGRO

RETOX
(COOKING VINYL) www.cookingvinyl.com
Semen spewing', denim wearin' deathpunk



Turbonegro is a bunch of Norwegian dudes born of the Apocalypse in the Age of Pamparius, who have scoured the bowels of rock 'n' roll, dredging up the carcasses of Krokus and Alice Cooper, Mötley Crüe and Iggy Pop, in search of good times and good riddance. The band imploded in the late '90s, but the semen-spewin', denim-wearin', faux-moroti-rollers have returned in true deathpunk form, channeling and chastising all music that has cum before them (and after!). There's gonna be "Hell Toupee" (an ode to man wigs!) to those who stand in their way; Hank Von Helvete apes Iggy on "I Wanna Come"; and "What Is Rock" sounds like Tesco Vee's Meatmen. Everything is in place—Euroboy's hot licks, the massive riffs and even Happy Tom's phone pranks—to entice anybody, not just the Turbojugend. Are you ready for the darkness? **GREG BARBERA**

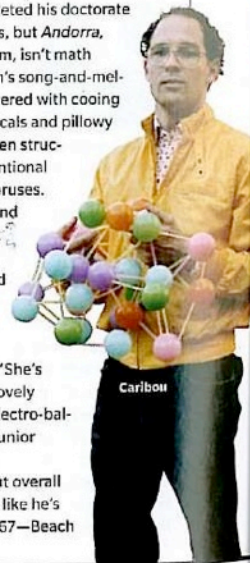
CARIBOU

ANDORRA
(MERGE) www.mergerecords.com
Sums are greater than the equations



2003's *Up In Flames*, Dan Snaith's mostly instrumental second album, burst with ideas, meld-

ing electronics and samples with psychedelic guitars and rock crescendos. Back then Snaith recorded as Manitoba, named after his home province in Canada (not after the Handsome wrestler who sued him); now, he records (basically alone) and tours (with a band) as Caribou. Snaith recently completed his doctorate in mathematics, but *Andorra*, his fourth album, isn't math rock. It's Snaith's song-and-melody record, layered with cooing and sighing vocals and pillow harmonies, often structured in conventional verses and choruses. "Sundialing" and "Niobe" revisit the Krautrock that dominated 2005's *The Milk of Human Kindness* and "She's the One" is a lovely downtempo electro-ballad featuring Junior Boys' Jeremy Greenspan, but overall Snaith sounds like he's discovered 1967—Beach



Caribou

http://www.examiner.com/a-947283~Aaron_Keith_Harris_In_search_of_music_that_appeals_to_the_head_and_heart.html

Commentary - In search of music that appeals to the head and heart

Sep 21, 2007 by [Aaron Keith Harris](#), The Examiner

You may have to give a lot of music away for free, but if it's good, it will find an audience. And that audience will come to your shows and buy your T-shirts. And they will share your music with others, which can only be a good thing.

Which is what I'm doing with King Wilkie, who are playing at the 8x10 tonight at 7 p.m.

In 2004, they released "Broke" one of the best bluegrass albums of the decade. On the strength of that album and their tremendous live shows, they were chosen as the best new act by the International Bluegrass Music Association.

Now their touring behind "Low Country Suite," an acoustic record with only the faintest hints of a bluegrass sound.

But it's a great record, one that could have been made in Laurel Canyon in the early 1970s. Something not quite as dissolute as the Rolling Stones of "Beggar's Banquet" or "Let it Bleed," and not quite as refined as Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

And like any really good band, King Wilkie is better live, and you have a chance to see and hear for yourself.

WASHINGTON POST

PERFORMING ARTS

Tuesday, May 11, 2004;

King Wilkie

You have to wonder what makes six young men in their early twenties want to pick up banjos and mandolins and form a bluegrass band, but there they were on Saturday at an outdoor festival in Reston Town Center, leaning into a single microphone and strumming and harmonizing the way bluegrass bands have for the better part of a century.

All hail King Wilkie.

With their MTV-ready looks -- guitarist-vocalist Johnny McDonald could be Brad Pitt's younger brother -- and obvious musical talent, the members of King Wilkie could probably enjoy more success doing the rock thing, but their hearts simply aren't in it. For some reason they prefer to play timeworn melodies in time-tested methods handed down from rural holler to holler. Dressed in suits and ties and playing with the kind of passion that comes from someplace other than a paycheck, the Nashville-based band freshened up the requisite bluegrass handbook -- Bill Monroe, Ralph and Carter Stanley, etc. -- and shuffled in original compositions that stood up well by comparison. King Wilkie -- the band is named for Monroe's horse -- eschews the temptations of New Grass, Jam Grass or any other Grass-of-the-moment and seemed content to play the music as it was intended.

McDonald and mandolin player Reid Burgess do the bulk of the heavy lifting, but when they get their chance to solo, banjoist Abe Spear, guitarist Ted Pitney and upright bassist Drew Breakey prove their mettle. In fact, fiddler Nick Reeb should get more solo time -- each time he stepped up to the mike was a thrill.

Sharing the festival bill with King Wilkie was Washington's reigning go-to party band, the Hula Monsters, who put forth another high-spirited set of ukulele and lap-steel roots rock. Elvis, Johnny Cash and Ernest Tubb, among others, were successfully channeled via the South Pacific.

-- **Buzz McClain**

DETROIT FREE PRESS

King Wilkie College-town bluegrass

by James M. Manheim

3/1/2005

When I saw the young bluegrass band King Wilkie at the Ann Arbor Folk Festival in January, they weren't quite what I'd expected. Based in Charlottesville, Virginia, they've been hailed as the next big thing in traditional bluegrass, as proof of the music's continuing relevance for a new generation. They have a suitably reverent name in this most tradition bound of genres: King Wilkie was supposedly the name of Bill Monroe's favorite horse. And they perform straightforward versions of standards like "In the Pines" on their album *Broke*.

The sextet that took the stage (a little wide eyed) at Hill Auditorium was something else again: a thoroughly contemporary group of young people who had found new resonances in tradition. In place of the formality of Bill Monroe and the other figures of classic bluegrass, they had looselimbbed

charisma. They play nightclubs and bars as well as folk clubs and coffeehouses, and with one exception they didn't grow up with bluegrass at all. Two of the band's central members, mandolinist and vocalist Reid Burgess and guitarist Ted Pitney, attended Kenyon College in Ohio, not noted as a bluegrass stronghold. They plunged headlong into the music after attending a bluegrass festival and getting hooked.

King Wilkie, in fact, has some affinities with the Yonder Mountain String Band, a new acoustic jam band that has gained a strong youthful following by taking off from the bluegrass point of departure of the original jam band, the Grateful Dead. King Wilkie's musicians have a relaxed quality, not the tight-wire edge of traditional bluegrass, and they have a good shot at attracting Americana radio programmers to their music. But instead of going off into long improvisatory jams, they stick to older songs and to new compositions following traditional models. They dress in jackets the way the oldest bands did, and they do the intricate dance of sharing a couple of microphones, a traditional limitation that a few modern bands have turned into a virtue.

At the Folk Festival, King Wilkie ended its set with "Damn Yankee Lad." An obscure old song popularized to a degree by the 1960s country-folk singer Jimmie Driftwood (and previously sung in bluegrass only by the very untraditional Osborne Brothers), it's a snarky story told by a Reconstruction-era Union soldier who passes for a southerner ("I'm just a damn Yankee, way down in the South. / I love to kiss southern belles on the mouth. / I laugh when they say all them Yankees so bad. / Nobody knows I'm a damn Yankee lad"). King Wilkie harks back to the college-town bluegrass of the 1960s, which combined deep reverence for the tradition with all kinds of sly imagination. This is definitely a band to watch. Check out King Wilkie for yourself at the Ark on Sunday, March 20

(((DEBUT)))

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King Wilkie

Young bluegrass traditionalists make their mark



Riding Bill Monroe's legacy: (back row) Ted Pitney, John McDonald, Drew Broakey, (front row) Abe Spear, Nick Reeb, and Reid Burgess.

Judging by the reaction of many self-styled bluegrass traditionalists, King Wilkie might be described as the "anti-Nickel Creek." Last year, the youthful sextet, named after Bill Monroe's favorite horse, shot from the gate to take the same IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) Emerging Artist award that the Creeksters won in 2000—right about the time King Wilkie founders and Kenyon College roommates Reid Burgess and Ted Pitney were first bitten by the bluegrass bug at an Ohio festival.

But where Nickel Creek made its mark with an acoustic fusion of bluegrass, folk, pop, Celtic, and jazz elements, King Wilkie has earned an outpouring of enthusiasm for its devotion to a classic, hard-driving sound built directly on the legacy of Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, and a clutch of grass-

roots musicians who preached the bluegrass gospel to regional audiences during the lean years of the 1950s and 1960s. Dressed in suits and ties and ganged around a single vocal microphone, the group might be seen as simply recreating the sound and look of their heroes, and for some of their fans, that's undoubtedly the appeal.

For mandolinist and tenor/lead singer Burgess, though, there's an important distinction to be made, which he traces to the way the band's songwriters channel the rock and jazz they grew up with into the bluegrass framework. "It's subtle," he notes. "It's not that we're trying to make some kind of fusion. It's the result of trying to be as traditional as we can, trying to capture the spirit of that music, but at the same time trying to do what's natural to us. And growing up with so much different music automatically influences our taste and approach.

"There's a lot of revivalists," he continues, "and when we started we were into that—just going up there and playing Stanley Brothers songs because we thought they were cool. But after a while, that gets to be like musical tourism. We want to write songs that are natural to us, but do it within that older framework. It's a tough thing to do. It's like refurbishing some antique piece or renovating an old house. You want to take a sound that's old and make it functional, while keeping that classic quality."

In another departure from the bluegrass norm, none of King Wilkie's members served the apprenticeships with established acts that have filled the resumé of previous generations of young traditionalists. Instead, Burgess and Pitney pulled up stakes after graduation, moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, and began a process of recruitment, woodshedding, and gigging more famil-

By Jon Weisberger

lar to garage rock bands than bluegrass groups. Those efforts resulted in the current lineup, a growing circle of fans, a 2002 indie release, and a deal the following year with Charlottesville's granddaddy of bluegrass labels, Rebel Records.

To produce their label debut, *Broke*, the group turned to banjo player and bluegrass savant Bob Carlin. "Ted and I knew of him from that first festival," Burgess says. "He was there with John Hartford. As a player, he's mainly an old-time guy, but he knows more about bluegrass than most people know he does. It was cool to have him produce and be able to connect the dots back to our initial bluegrass experience."

Mixing a handful of older songs like "Sparkling Brown Eyes" (a 1954 hit for Webb Pierce and the Wilburn Brothers) and the durable "Little Birdie" with a half-dozen originals by Pitney and Burgess, the CD plays to King Wilkie's strengths, including the dynamic interplay between lead singer John

What They Play

King Wilkie's guitarists contrast sharply when it comes to choosing gear. Lead guitarist **TED PITNEY** says he's "always messing with different strings, picks, capos, and so on," while rhythm man **JOHN McDONALD** is quick to identify consistent favorites—a wide Ptacek capo ("it's a big, medieval-looking thing," he says with a chuckle), medium-gauge GHS Signature Bronze strings, and Dunlop GatorGrip 2.0 mm. picks. McDonald likes his 1975 Mossman Flint Hills guitar for its wide neck and string spacing, while Pitney's main ax is a 1957 Martin D-18. "I sometimes use a '60s spray-paint-and-plywood Sears Silvertone for a more intimate sound," he adds, "and my third guitar now is a Dana Bourgeois Slope D dreadnought from early in his career—number 160." Onstage, lead singer McDonald's guitar licks come through on the band's single vocal mic—an Audio-Technica AT4060—while Pitney works an Audio-Technica ATMPRO37R set to one side.

McDonald's rhythm guitar and lead guitarist Pitney's fills and rhythmic accents. Bolstered by lively playing from since-departed bassist Drew Breakey, the twin guitars form a solid base for heartfelt vocal trios and aggressive, get-after-it soloing by Pitney, Burgess, fiddler Nick Reeb, and banjo man Abe Spear.

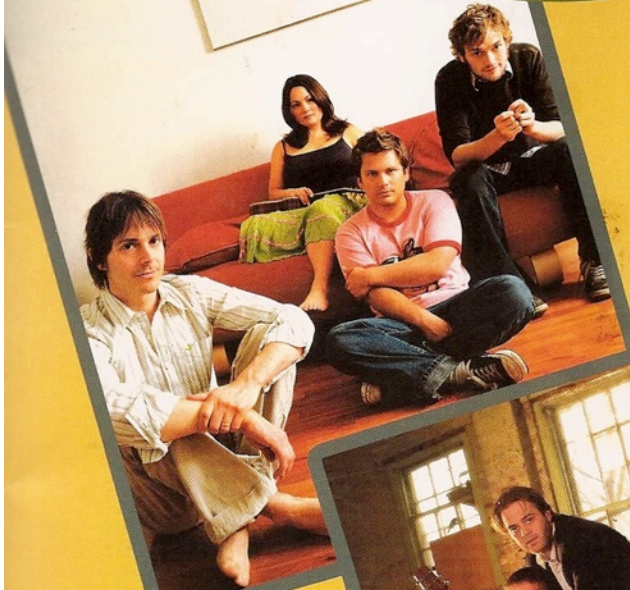
Broke has garnered raves not just from bluegrass publications but from

mainstream media too, and few reviewers have failed to note the group's youth and good looks. "It puts pressure on us," Burgess acknowledges. "Some people are looking at us kind of funny because we've only been doing this for three or four years. But that's a good thing to us, because we do better under pressure. At the same time, we understand that this is still developing, and it's only going to get better." ■

MOON SHINER

Bluegrass journal

Discover BLUEGRASS.



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キング・ウィルキー登場



最新作「Broke」(REB-CD-1802)

この数年、トラッド・ブルーグラスが凄まじいまでにホットな状況になってきている。かつて80年代、あのジョンソン・マウンテン・ボーイズの登場にはじまった、「ネオ・トラッド」とも称される動きがあったが、いまやそのときを上回る勢いが感じられる。あの映画『オー・ブラザー!』(2000年)を契機とするルーツ回帰というトレンドを背景に、トラディショナル・ブルーグラスが大きな流れとなっているのだ。

その流れを象徴するのが、例えばクラシック・ブルーグラスをひとつのショーとしてよみがえらせたカール・シフレット&ビッグ・カントリー・ショーであり、ローカル・トラッドの伝統を今に受け継いだワイルドウッド・ヴァレー・ボーイズであり、先人たちのソウル、スピリットをより増幅したかたちに生々しく映し出したオープン・ロードといったバンド群である。そして今年、その流れの最先端に華々しく登場したのがキング・ウィルキーである。

キング・ウィルキー、そう、ビル・モンローの愛馬の名をとってバンド名にするという、ブルーグラス・オタクぶりを公言してはばからない、21歳から26歳という若者たちのバンドである。その名前を知ったのは昨年6月、レベル・レコードと契約したというニュースをきいたときであった。プレス・リリースにいわく、真にトラディショナル・ブルーグラス・サウンドを理解した、若さとエネルギーに満ちたハード・コア、ハード・ドライヴィング・ブルーグラス。そして10月、ルイヴィルでのIBMAファン・フェスに参加した彼等の演奏をはじめて目の当たりにすることができた。グラント・ボウル・ルームでのプログラムが終了した深夜、レベル・レコー

ドが若い!!…先頃来日し、トラッドグラスのソウルをまざまざと聴かせたブラッド・フォークも20代、そして今回、トラッドグラスの表舞台に飛び出してきたキング・ウィルキーはなんと、21才から26才までの若さ。そう言えば、IBMAウィークの期間中、B.O.M.スタッフの部屋の床で、寝袋にくるまって寝ていた若者も、メンバーにいます。

今月のレコード・レビューで紹介されているスティーブ・キャニオン・レンジャーズやこのキング・ウィルキーら、大学出身バンドが、「ブルーグラスが好きだっ!!」、「ブルーグラスがやりたいっ!!」っていう強い気持ち、それをストレートに表現して、なお、1段階ずつ階段を登ることができる音楽状況がある。それが今の米国若者ブルーグラス事情だ。

文/宇野誠之

ドのショウケースが行われるホテルのスイートルームにマイクをセットしての演奏である。

ケニー&アマング・スミス、カール・シフレット、ワイルドウッド・ヴァレー・ボーイズなどおなじみのバンドにまじって、同じくレベルと契約したばかりのスティーブ・キャニオン・レンジャーズとキング・ウィルキー、期待の新人バンドの登場であった。真っ白のスーツに身を包んだ6人の若者たちが演奏するブルーグラスは、クラシック・ブルーグラスの雰囲気いっばいのオールド・ファッションなスタイルに、初々しい若さのエネルギーと生々しいソウル、そしてブルーグラス大好きという気持ちが目いっぱい表現された、期待にたがわぬものであった。そして翌日のメイン・ステージでの演奏も、大きな舞台に負けることなく、ワン・マイク・セッティングでの鮮やかなパフォーマンスで多くの観客にその存在を印象付けることに成功したのである。

キング・ウィルキーの歴史は…

1998年、オハイオ州キャンピアのケニヨン・カレッジの学生だったリード・バージェスとテッド・ピットニーのふたりが出会ったときにはじまった。

ミルウォーキー出身のマンドリン・プレイヤー、リードはプロのミュージシャンを夢見ていたが、実際のところはロック・バンド、R.E.M.でしかマンドリンを聴いたことがなかったという。また、ニューヨーク出身のテッドは、ジャズ・ギターをプレイし大学では音楽を専攻していた。学内でロック・バンドを編成しキャンパスの人気者となっていた、そんなふたりが2000年の夏、地元オハイオのモヒカン・ブルーグラス・フェスを見たそのときから

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昨年のIBMAファン・フェスにて。写真：井上三郎

ルーフグラス、それも、マック・マーティンやジョー・ヴァルなど実に渋いところを目標とするというスタンスで、リードとジョン、ふたりがリード・ヴォーカルをスイッチしながらデュエットを聴かせるという、ベーシックかつオールド・ファッションなスタイルを追究していった。

そして早々に、グレイ・フォックス・フェスでのライブを収録したミニ・アルバムと、スタジオ録音のフル・アルバム『True Songs』、2枚の自主制作アルバムを発表した。モンロー・ソングなどの有名曲主体に、マック・マーティンや70年代レベル・レコード作品でソングライターとしても知る人ぞ知るといった存在のロイ・マクミランなど通好みの渋い選曲が目立つスタジオ作品『True Songs』では、まだまだ荒削りでバランスも危ういところが散見されるとはいいいながらも、その筋のニオイがブンブンする、とてもイマドキの若者とは思えないサウンドがなんとも強烈なインパクトをもって伝わってくるものであった。

この2作品、そして精力的なライブ活動(数あるブルーグラス・バンドの中でも、もっともハードなツアーを消化しているという)での人気と実力が、レベルとの契約につながったのである。

最新作『Broke』とボブ・カーリン

レベルとの契約後、2003年のサマー・シーズンを前にコリンに代わってドリュー・ブレイキー(bs)が参加、そしてニック・リープのフィドルも加わってさらに強力な布陣となった。6人編成となったキング・ウィルキーは、老舗ビーン・ブロッサムをはじめ、東はニュー・ヨークのグレイ・フォックス・フェスから、西はコロラドのロッキー・フェス、そしてIBMAファン・フェスを頂点とする多忙なフェス出演/ライブ活動によって、異例ともいえるスビー

ドで注目を集めていった。

そして彼らが自信を持って送り出したのが、今年5月に発売されたレベル・レコードからのナショナル・デビュー作『Broke』(REB-CD-1802)である。

ラウンダー・レコードから4枚のソロ・アルバムを発表しているクロウハンマー・バンジョーの達人にして、ハートフォード・ストリング・バンドで晩年のジョン・ハートフォードの知恵袋的役割を務めていたボブ・カーリンをプロデューサーに迎え、昨年12月トラッド・ブルーグラスの本場ノース・カロライナで録音されたこのアルバム、ボブにとっておそらく30年のキャリアにして初めてのブルーグラス・アルバムのプロデュースではないかと思われるが、さすがトラディショナル・ミュージックに精通したヴェテランならではの、50年代黄金期にタイムスリップしたかのようなバンドの個性をクラシックなブルーグラスのフォーマットに生かして、実に生きのいい作品に仕上げている。

わずか1分あまりにブルーグラス・インストのエッセンスを集約したラルフ・ルイス作(ビル・モンロー初来日ときのギタリストのフィドル・チューンから、典型的なクラシック・ブルーグラスの匂いをふりまくオリジナルへと進行する、往時のラジオ・ショウを思い起こさせる導入部からいきなりオールド・ファッションなサウンドに若さのエネルギーをぶちこんだ、生々しいブルーグラスで圧倒してくる。オリジナル6曲とクラシックのカヴァー5曲という構成、そのカヴァー曲も、トラッドの"Pretty Polly"、ジミー・ロジャースの"Blue Yodel #7"あたりはともかく、ヒーローと公言してはばからないジョー・ヴァルがソースと思われる"Sparkling Brown Eyes"や、"You Are My Sunshine"で知られるジミー・デイヴィス知事の隠れた名曲"Where the Old Red River Flows"、モンロー・ブラザーズの"Some Glad Day"という選曲には、根っからのトラッド・ブルーグラスのファンをも唸らせてしまう、そんなセンスの良さが如実に窺い知れる。

リード(2曲)とテッド(4曲)のオリジナル・ソングも、望郷の念や恋人への思慕といったクラシック・ブルーグラスの普遍的な主題を、典型的なストレート・ブルーグラスからゴスペル調、ブラザー・デュオを模したストーリー・ソング仕立てと、トラッド・ブルーグラスのパターンを駆使した極上の仕上がりを示している。リード自身は、ふたりとも南部のいわゆるブルーグラス・カントリーの出身ではないことが、ソングライティングに微妙な変化をもたらしていることを意識しているようで、みずからの"Goodbye So Long"ではトラッド・ブルーグラスを

KING WILKIE GOING FOR BROKE

The packed house at the Cantab Lounge in Cambridge, Massachusetts, isn't your typical bluegrass crowd. On a cold Tuesday in February, tattooed hipsters—who would look more at home at a Strokes concert—share tables with clean-cut Boston kids, businessmen, and Berklee College of Music professors. But one immutable, galvanizing truth presents itself midway through the evening: *The crowd digs yodeling.*

by Taylor Smith
photos by Eric England

■ **King Wilkie's recent success only pushes the band harder**

More precisely, the crowd digs the high-tenor yodeling of Reid Burgess, mandolin player for Charlottesville, Virginia-based King Wilkie. The young band fires into "Sparkling Brown Eyes," an up-tempo waltz that features Reid blasting his sweeping tenor in a call-and-response with lead singer and guitarist John McDonald. The song is a nod to the late Joe Val, a local Boston boy who Peter Rowan once called "the voice of bluegrass in New England." The crowd loves it.

After their performance—an all-too-short, one-set affair—the band members loosen their neckties and lounge around the Cantab. But relaxation soon gives way to work, as it always seems to do in the world of King Wilkie. The group dutifully chats with fans, returns phone calls, and hawks t-shirts and copies of their first CD, an

independently recorded disc called *True Songs*. Reid mans the soundboard for the next group on stage. Before long, the band packs up their instruments and merchandise, hangs up their thrift-store suits, and points their gray Ford Econoline van west on Interstate 90 toward upstate New York and the next string of gigs.

The band's current schedule doesn't allow for much free time. But if King Wilkie took a pause to see what's happened in the three short years since the band was formed, they'd have plenty to be happy about. Case in point: During the first two weeks of February, the band staged a successful blitzkrieg of Nashville, winning the SPBGMA international band competition and playing at the venerable Station Inn with luminaries such as the Nashville Bluegrass Band and the Lonesome River Band. Their February schedule included

dates with Jerry Douglas and sets at the Boston Bluegrass Union's Joe Val Bluegrass Festival, where the group backed up the legendary talents of Peter Rowan and Bill Keith. There's also the matter of the band's record deal: King Wilkie signed with Rebel Records in June of last year, and the band's major-label debut, *Broke*, was slated for an April 20 release.

■ **Learning the ropes**

Reid and Ted Pitney, King Wilkie's lead guitarist and chief songwriter, met at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, during the late '90s. Together, the pair joined a number of bands during college, playing styles ranging from jazz to hip hop. Reid moonlighted in a glam-rock band called Rattlesnake Suitcase (think pyrotechnics and tight pants), but bluegrass was not yet in their repertoire. "We had always messed around in our dorm rooms playing acoustic

music. We all had guitars and one of our buddies had an old tenor banjo, but we definitely weren't playing bluegrass," says Ted.

Bluegrass didn't make an appearance until 1999, when Reid and Ted happened across a bluegrass festival in nearby Loudonville, Ohio. "We watched John Hartford onstage, then we went over and talked with him. It didn't take long to see that everyone's very accessible in bluegrass, and that's one of the things that really turned me on to it," says Ted. "I was coming from seeing a lot of jazz, where everyone is much more competitive. By the second bluegrass festival I went to, I was picking with 40-year-old yuppies and a coal miner from Kentucky. There's aren't too many times that different lifestyles overlap as they do in bluegrass."

In short order, Reid and Ted immersed themselves in bluegrass. During a semester abroad in Australia, Ted used a Walkman to learn traditional bluegrass tunes on a beat-up old acoustic guitar. Reid picked up a used mandolin and, in his words, "was addicted." The pair spent their senior year getting deeper into the music, educating themselves about Bill Monroe and the other

roots of the bluegrass family tree.

After graduation in 2001, Reid and Ted, along with a few other college friends sympathetic to the bluegrass cause, rented an old farmhouse outside of Charlottesville in Keswick, Virginia. The plan was simple: Spend a year in bluegrass absorption mode and see how far they could take their fledgling band, Colonel Catastrophe.

But before moving lock, stock and barrel to Virginia, the friends undertook the post-graduation rite of passage, the Great American Road Trip, which landed them at the Rockygrass Bluegrass Festival in Lyons, Colorado. Enrolled in the Rockygrass Academy, a weeklong bluegrass workshop that precedes the festival, the group took lessons with bluegrass luminaries such as Del and Ronnie McCoury, Chris Thile, Peter Rowan, and Jim Hurst. "The Academy really got everyone into it," says Reid. "I was definitely deep into bluegrass at that point, and it really got Ted onto the bluegrass bandwagon."

Settled in Virginia after their road trip, the group—

which featured college buddies Colin McLear on bass, Tim Hallett on guitar, and Read McNamara on banjo—started playing open mics around the Charlottesville area. Their landlord offered Colonel Catastrophe their first gig at a friend's party. But what was initially a post-graduation experiment soon turned into a full-time affair. "We started getting really serious," remembers Ted. "We were practicing every night, listening to as many CDs as we could, seeing live bluegrass whenever we got a chance."

After a friend mentioned that the group could get some exposure by playing at the



IBMA's World of Bluegrass, the group in 2001 made plans to head to Louisville, Kentucky, for the October convention. Their impromptu 2:00 a.m. showcase caught the ear of Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival producer Mary Doub, who immediately gave the band a main stage slot at the Ancramdale, New York festival. "When I met with them at IBMA they were so in love with the music and so enthusiastic," says Mary. "I immediately had a few people I really respect listen to them, and they all agreed that we'd found something pretty special."

■ Channeling the masters

By the summer of 2002, the first of a number of lineup changes found Abe Spear, handling five-string chores for the band. Abe, a young banjo picker from Lexington, North Carolina, who was enrolled at East Tennessee State University's bluegrass program, toured with the band during school breaks, but joined up full-time in January 2003. John McDonald joined at the same time, having been introduced to King Wilkie through mutual friends in the Colorado-based bluegrass outfit, Open Road. Fiddler Nick Reeb and bassist Drew Breakey moved to Charlottesville in July 2003, rounding out the band's current lineup.

As the band's roster solidified, so did its sound. To properly define its style, the group decided to drop the name Colonel Catastrophe ("it was kind of silly," says Ted) in favor of King Wilkie. The name, which pays homage to Bill Monroe's famed Tennessee walking horse of the same name, is an unabashed acknowledgment of King Wilkie's traditional influences. "There's a pure, unvarnished quality to traditional bluegrass, and there's a lot of genius to it," says Reid. "There's poetry in 'Footprints in the Snow' or some of Carter Stanley's tunes, and the power of those songs really speaks to me."

King Wilkie's traditional influences certainly come through in their music, but with sly references rather than overbearing reverence. Rather than attempting to clone the sound of artists such as Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys or the Stanley Brothers, King Wilkie ably channels its influences while infusing its own modern perspective on bluegrass. The result is a sound that's uniquely King Wilkie: tight yet raw, thoughtful but not slickly calculated, and wonderfully impassioned without slipping into nostalgic irony. "Bluegrass from the '40s and '50s wasn't gaudy, commercial country—it was this beautiful and dignified



thing," says Reid. "But we're not trying to reproduce that sound because it would end up sounding pathetic. Instead, we're trying to learn from it to expand our music. We want it to come through us."

Musically, King Wilkie has worked hard as a group to maintain and build on its distinctive brand of bluegrass—an increasingly difficult task considering the band's sound is a constantly moving target. But thanks to the band's incomparable work ethic, King Wilkie hasn't shied away from the challenge. "Whether it's my guitar playing or the way that Reid sings tenor, everyone's style is really developing," says Ted. "I can't think of many other bands who are all learning how and trying to find their own style at the same time."

Reid and Ted are the only original members of King Wilkie, but they insist that the group truly is the sum of its parts, and that no one member carries more weight than another. That comes through immediately when spending time with the band: Each person has specific jobs offstage—from handling merchandise to recording live shows to keeping receipts straight on the road. The band has periodic business-like and democratic "state of the union"-type meetings to discuss the group's progress. (Typical refrain: "It looks like the band is in good shape financially and sociologically, and so we carry on"). "We really stress the fact that we're a band, and we don't want the band to be a bunch of sidemen," says Reid.

■ Coming into their own

Highway 40 West runs across Tennessee directly through Nashville. The King Wilkie boys have logged thousands of

miles on that road during their frequent trips to Music City, and likely have a love-hate relationship with the 212-mile strip of blacktop between Nashville and Interstate 81, where the band peels northeast toward Charlottesville. It seems appropriate, then, that King Wilkie chose to bookend its debut Rebel release, *Broke*, with a rocking take on former Bluegrass Boy sideman Ralph Lewis's "40 West."

Recorded in December, 2003 at Durham, North Carolina's Overdub Lane, *Broke* was produced by clawhammer banjo player extraordinaire Bob Carlin, who has recorded such artists as John Hartford and the Reeltime Travelers. *Broke* was recorded mostly live in the studio. Bob gave the album a natural sound by using vintage mics and a lot of analog gear. "We really wanted to make the best possible document of a live performance, so we stayed away from effects and tried to capture the natural sound of everything," he says.

Also, the record was recorded in less than a week—a testament to the band's incredible work ethic. Bob remembers the musicians coming into the studio after spending countless hours rehearsing the material during pre-production. "They were really ready to record—it was effortless," he says. "In a lot of ways, they're probably the most organized band I've seen as far as the way they take care of their business and the way they approach their music."

Bob worked with the band to trim dozens of potential tunes—many discovered by the group in the Rebel Records archives—down to the 12 that appear the


continued on page 37

album. Of the 15 tracks on *Broke* (40 West" appears twice), six are originals written by Reid and Ted. The original numbers fit in seamlessly among such traditional chestnuts as "Little Birdie" and "Blue Yodel #7," and more obscure gems such as "Sparkling Brown Eyes" and "Where the Old Red River Flows." (It bears mentioning that the vastly under-appreciated Joe Val, whose material remains a strong influence on the band, recorded the latter two songs.)

Ted, who contributed four songs on the album, is a prolific songwriter who is constantly testing new material on his band mates. They don't all work with King Wilkie's style, and Ted has no trouble letting the band mold his originals to fit their collective style. "When I brought 'Drifting Away' to the band, it had more of a Larry Sparks's feel with a real forward drive to it," he says. "We changed the key, slowed it down, and gave it a more waltz-type swing." Another good example is Ted's "Lee and Paige," a tear-jerking true-life story about the titular 15-year-old lovers who choose to die together rather than live without each other. Simple and uncluttered, it's a stunningly beautiful song. Ted steps out of the spotlight to let Reid and McDonald perform it alone, their guitar and mandolin in stark accompaniment to their close, duet-style harmonies.

Both Bob and Rebel Records have high hopes for the release. Bob points to the

success he saw stemming from the Keeltime Travelers 2002 release, *Living Reeltime, Thinkin' Old Time*. The album helped generate a lot of attention for that band, and he thinks King Wilkie's *Broke* has the potential to do the same. Meanwhile, Rebel Records's Mark Freeman has been impressed with the band since seeing them perform last year at Michael's Bistro, a local Charlottesville pub. "I like to say that they're the Nickel Creek of traditional bluegrass," he says, referring to Nickel Creek's success in turning younger listeners on to their unique brand of acoustic popgrass. "King Wilkie could really give traditional bluegrass a shot in the arm. There are a lot of younger fans out there that like the traditional music, and they're waiting for a group that they can identify with."

The King Wilkie boys also are excited to see the reaction to *Broke*, but they're already focusing on loftier goals such as the next album and the band's permanent spot in the bluegrass pantheon. "We're really happy with *Broke*, but we want the next one to put a long-lasting stamp on the band," says Ted. "We want to be a link on the bluegrass chain." Other long-term goals include playing the Grand Ole Opry and, with luck, appearing on the television show *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. But to paraphrase Big Mon, luck ain't no part of nothing. They'll get there with hard work. 

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King Wilkie injects beyond-their-years chops and the knowing interplay of savvy veterans with an electrifying energy that spikes the punch of the time-honored bluegrass recipe.

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| 6/8/04 | Nashville, TN | The Exit Inn |
| 6/10/04 | Nashville, TN | CMA Music Festival - Riverfront Stage |
| 6/11/04 | Wind Gap, PA | Wind Gap Bluegrass Festival |
| 6/12/04 | Sparta, TN | Golden Mountain Bluegrass Festival |
| 6/18/04 | Bean Blossom, IN | Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival |
| 6/25/04 | Owensboro, KY | IBMM River of Music Festival |
| 6/26/04 | Summersville, WV | Music in the Mountains |
| 6/27/04 | Carlisle, PA | Thornwald Park |
| 7/2/04 | Charlottesville, VA | Fridays After Five |
| 7/4/04 | Orkney Springs, VA | Bishop's Bluegrass Festival |
| 7/10/04 | Jacksonville, IL | Terry Lease Festival |
| 7/16/04 | Ancramdale, NY | Grey Fox Festival |
| 7/17/04 | Ancramdale, NY | Grey Fox Festival |
| 7/20/04 | Cambridge, MA | Cantab Lounge |
| 7/23/04 | Lyons, CO | Roclograss |
| 7/24/04 | Grass Valley, CA | Wolf Mountain Festival |
| 7/30/04 | South Hiram, ME | Osipee Bluegrass Festival |
| 7/31/04 | South Hiram, ME | Osipee Bluegrass Festival |

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countrymusic.about.com/cs/productreviews/gr/blkingwilkie.htm

King Wilkie - Broke

About.com Rating ★★★★★



Most diehard pop music geeks (i.e., critics) are familiar with the phenomenon of falling in love with an exciting new band or artist, usually on the basis of a first album, and then feeling like a jilted lover after finding that the band has broken up before a second album could be finished, or that the personnel have changed or that the second album simply fails to live up to the promise of the first. In many cases, the disappointed fan suspects that the band members were merely playing around, toying with the listeners' affection while waiting for their med school applications to come through. To be frank, many artists in recent years sound like they are just killing time until they can get into grad school and get on with their lives. In other cases – Death Cab for Cutie, for example - critical and popular acclaim save the day.

This phenomenon can occur even in the relatively arcane sphere of bluegrass. Every year, it seems, a new young bluegrass hero or set of heroes seems to arrive. A few years ago it was the Gibson Brothers, whose career plummeted when they signed with Ricky Skaggs label and were in limbo for three years before they could extricate themselves, with their integrity intact but no record to show for it. More recently, the Joe Val festival in Boston has been (as it was for the Gibson Brothers) a launching pad for significant new artists. Last year it was Colorado's Open Road; this year it was the Charlottesville-based King Wilkie, named after Bill Monroe's favorite horse. Unlike the first generations of bluegrass legends (or rock legends, for that matter) for whom music was a way out of poverty, an alternative to the mines or a meat packing plant up North, today's hot acts are as likely to have software engineering or corporate law as a fallback career strategy. That's why I know my heart will be broken soon but I'm going to go out on a limb and declare that I have seen the future of bluegrass and its name is [King Wilkie](#).

The six members of King Wilkie, essentially college buddies from the University of Virginia, have produced, in *Broke*, (Rebel Records) the best new bluegrass album in years. This is a band bursting with talent: though singer John McDonald, mandolinist Reid Burgess, and lead guitarist and songwriter Ted Pitney are the standouts, banjoist Abe Spear, bassist Drew Breakey, and fiddler Nick Reeb all provide assured, distinctive support. "Bursting" is no exaggeration, for King Wilkie manages to combine in one group the two basic strands of bluegrass – the Bill Monroe line, with its bluesy mandolin and high lonesome vocal sound and the Stanley Brothers' harmonies and songwriting, deriving from the Appalachian ballad tradition that goes back to the Child ballads of Britain and Scotland.

Bill Monroe melded the Scots-Irish fiddle sound he learned from his mother and Uncle Pen with the early commercial country sound of Jimmie Rodgers, whose sardonic lyrics and plaintive, yodeling vocals - the wry lonesome sound, you might say - inspired everyone from Hank Snow to Ernest Tubb to Merle Haggard. The Stanley Brothers, on the other hand, were primarily influenced by the Appalachian ballad and vocal tradition. They did few instrumentals – their most famous, "Clinch Mountain Breakdown," was a showpiece for then subservient brother Ralph's banjo, until the songwriting genius and smarter, older brother Carter died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1966. The Stanley vocal harmonies – Carter with an innocent, almost boyish lead and Ralph with his almost feminine high tenor – combined to produce a single vocal sound that was at once both wizened and eerily childlike in its wonder at the wickedness of the world.

In King Wilkie, mandolinist Reid Burgess is the wonderful Jimmie Rodgers/Bill Monroe figure but in combination with lead singer John McDonald he produces the seamless Stanley sound as well. For a callow young'n just out of college, Reid Burgess sounds like the real thing – he's got the pipes and the loping, slightly cynical of Jimmie Rodgers plus the wonderfully rhythmic, melodic, understated mandolin of Monroe, which he displays on Jimmie's own "Blue Yodel #7," as well as on his own "Goodbye So Long," perhaps the standout track on *Broke*, destined to become a festival circuit standard.

King Wilkie has six members – a little unwieldy for most bluegrass aggregations, but in this case the reason is that chief in-house songwriter Ted Pitney shares guitar chores with singer John McDonald. Pitney is ready to give Gillian Welch some stiff competition for the title of authentic

impersonator of the timeless mountain gothic ballad tradition, a kind of Stephen Foster meets Flannery O'Connor thing. Like Welch, his songs embody, without simply imitating, the venerable forms and themes of American music, such as the star-crossed young lovers ("Lee and Paige") or the down and out "Broke Down and Lonesome"). The former is especially powerful – a tale of two 15 year old sweethearts who cling to each other in the face of a rushing locomotive, when summarized or read, but when sung by McDonald and Burgess the track seems both to celebrate and mourn the concept of ageless, triumphant love. A recent, as yet unreleased Ted Pitney song, "The Boy from Richmond," does an equally memorable turn on the ancient theme of the murderous jealous lover, in another Burgess- after one of them gets stuck in the tracks. It sounds ridiculously hokey of course, as almost all pop music lyrics do (remember "I Want to Hold Your Hand"? – it was no more clever in German, trust me) summarized or read, but when sung by McDonald and Burgess the track seems both to celebrate and mourn the concept of ageless, triumphant love. A recent, as yet unreleased Ted Pitney song, "The Boy from Richmond," does an equally memorable turn on the ancient theme of the murderous jealous lover, in another Burgess-McDonald duet.

In short, King Wilkie is the real deal: they can sing, write, reinterpret old songs (whether "Little Birdie" or Joe Val's signature tune, "Sparkling Brown Eyes") and they can do it live. They not only tore down the house at the February 2004 Joe Val festival in Boston, but they came out later that night and backed bluegrass godfather Peter Rowan, with little advance warning from Rowan and much to lose if they blew it. And they have been dominating bluegrass festivals ever since.

The members of King Wilkie are young but they don't sound like kids: they're no younger than the Stanley brothers or Early Scruggs or Jimmy Martin was when those bluegrass greats made their first seminal records in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Their voices and talents meld into a single compelling whole, so don't let them get away. Here's hoping that you discover King Wilkie before they start thinking about graduate school.

If you want a collection of pure bluegrass songs from a talented new group of gentleman, then you should give 'Broke' a try. Not only are the vocals fantastic, but the musicianship is exceptional.

'Broke' is King Wilkie's debut album & I am very impressed. Ranging from 21 years to 26 years old, these young gentlemen have stayed true to a pure bluegrass sound, while maintaining just a little bit of an edge to keep things fresh & listener's interested.

The first thing I was in awe of was the musicianship, the playing of the mandolin, fiddle, & banjo stood out so brightly & the vocals & harmony were just as pleasing. "It's Been A Long Time" is about feeling anxious to get home & see their companion. "All Night Blues" is one of those bluegrass songs that makes you wonder how they could play music that fast and accurately, while "Some Glad Day" gives the same feeling.

"Blue Yodel #7" is a standout, as the cover of the Jimmie Rodgers song is fantastic & not just because Texas is mentioned in the lyrics "I love Mississippi, look out Tennessee, but those Texas women made a mess of me." Death is hauntingly covered in "Goodbye So Long," where a man beneath an oak tree is now buried beneath an overgrown garden that he planted. "Where The Old Red River Flows" takes you back to how you feel about loving where you grew up.

"Sparkling Brown Eyes" tells a story of a man who longs to see the two brown eyes of the girl of his dreams. When the time comes he will be thankful for the help from "one in Heaven above." "Some Glad Day" closes the album with a gospel feel in a message that when all of our earthly deeds are done we will some day "fince sweet peace at Heaven's door."

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The Future of Bluegrass: King Wilkie Broke

By [Timothy Peters](#)

2004-11-15

I remember the first time my mother fed me cooked spinach like it was yesterday. The bitter taste resonated with me for years, and I resigned myself to never touch the stuff again. That all changed the day I got my hands on some fabulous spinach dip at a cocktail party. In the subsequent years, I've sampled many variations of spinach concoctions and haven't come across that haunting bitter taste again. Yes, I admit, I had been completely wrong about spinach and now consider myself reformed. When prepared properly, it can be the most delicious and satisfying course on the table.

What does spinach have to do with bluegrass music? Until recently, bluegrass had taken spinach's #1 spot on the list of things I adamantly disliked. I was again proven wrong when the new King Wilkie EP, *Tierra del Fuego*, crossed my path. After hearing just the first few captivating chords of "Wrecking Ball," I was hooked.

The aptly titled *Tierra del Fuego* ("earth of fire") sets the turf ablaze with five new original songs and a cover of "Juanita," originally written by Gram Parsons of the Flying Burrito Brothers. Joining these six talented young men from Charlottesville, Virginia, is the legendary banjo innovator Ben Keith on steel and dobro guitar. *Tierra del Fuego* is made up of mellow, "down-home," incredibly relaxing songs, each delivering a good story along the way. The passion, pain, and exuberance of these tales come through unmistakably in Reid Burgess' honest vocals and vibrant music accompaniment.

"Angeline" picks up where "Wrecking Ball" leaves off and softly hums a classic and universal tale of love lost. Broken hearts aside, the song is especially pleasant and sets up the more poignant narrative in "Boy From Richmond." Notably the mildest track of the bunch musically, the tune serves up a haunting recount of a young man who finds his lover in the arms of another, leaving the listener breathless and still.

The guys don't leave you there for long, as "Rockabye" crawls in and pumps some good spirits back into you, while the mood gains cheerful momentum with the group's impressive take on "Juanita." Rounding out the EP with high energy, King Wilkie leaves listeners revitalized and blissful with "Billy Mean's Blues," a song that abounds with mesmerizing flicks of the banjo and fiddle.

With their rawness and live energy, it's hard to believe these tracks were recorded in a studio. By the end of the record, you feel as if you've been sitting on a porch with these guys, sipping on lemonade or hooch, head back, toe tapping and feeling the pulse of the music through the imaginary floorboards and your veins.

King Wilkie's *Tierra del Fuego* is my bluegrass spinach dip. Just like spinach, when bluegrass is served up properly with the right amount of truth, talent, and inventiveness, it can be the most satisfying experience of your day.

King Wilkie's Reid Burgess

Wednesday, February 18, 2009 Cara Ellen Modisett

Why a farmhouse in Charlottesville?

Oh, Ted and I were in school up in Ohio and when we graduated we wanted to get out of there, and I had this idea of going down South. There was a couple of others with us then, and we wanted to sort of get to play together every day and learn from other people down there. It was sort of a romanticized idea, coming down to Charlottesville and being in Virginia, the countryside, and playing music.

What was your image of Virginia, and the Virginia mountains, before you came down here?

Well, my mother's from here, so I'd been here – well she's from Richmond, but we have relatives in Lexington. You know, I just, it was like music was always something that was a big part of my image, and I'm a history man, so the history of the area and of the music, it just seems like it's always been a part of the culture here...

I know that the band is named after Bill Monroe's favorite horse – do you remember the “a-ha!” moment when you realized that was the name for the band?

We were kind of hesitant – we had a couple names, and that was one of 'em – got it from the latest Bill Monroe biography that came out, Richard Smith wrote it. It wasn't really an “a-ha!” moment! [laughs] [It was] “ok, that'll work.”

I'm reading that your influences range widely – Bill Monroe, of course, The Cure...

The Cure? Really?

That's hilarious. I read it in one of these articles.

My God – someone's – ? Sure. That's funny, that that's out there. [laughs] Sure. That's true, and that's a good, broad – I would just say that the influences went, you know, pretty wide. You could throw those people in there.

Do you disagree with The Cure?

No, no.

Why bluegrass? What was it about the sound that drew you?

...Partly it was like an alternative to the alternative. It was something completely different, coming from a totally different place, than what we were growing up with – a lot of the more metallic, or you know, electric kind of things – and I think we gravitated towards that almost in a rebellion kind of way, 'cause it was different, you know. And it was cool and unique, and also the energy and the power of the other stuff was there – it was just quieter, you know. I think my ears would probably hurt from going to too many loud concerts, and it was refreshing.

Connected to that, why traditional bluegrass? Why have you not gone the route of Nickel Creek, or Bela Fleck, or the New Grass Revival?

Well, I wouldn't call us traditional bluegrass, but that especially initially was a lot of our influences, and what we were excited about was the stuff from that first generation, the '40s and '50s. There's somethin' about that – it's like a black and white photograph, but more than that, it's like – I don't know, it just – it hits harder, I don't know, it seemed more authentic, and just the traditional was pretty much what was speaking to us then.

You say you're not traditional.

No.

How do you measure the balance of traditional and contemporary in your music, and what do you do that's different from traditional?

It's hard to draw the line, 'cause I think some people still call us a traditional bluegrass band and other people would say what they like most about our music is how unique and different it is. I think we sort of blur those lines a bit, I think. I like that because that is where we're doing something in our own way, which is what we wanna do, and that's what Bill Monroe did, and it's taking the roots and making it into something that is your own.

How do you blur those lines?

Well, not in everything we do, but a lot of times there's this certain measure of success when you feel you've done something that's new but at the same time captures the essence of bluegrass, some of the spirit, some of the spirituality and some of the soul of that, but's still doin' somethin' like your own. In that I guess we just – we're like the original guys, it's not like they were out there trying to recreate or revive any tradition, it's just tryin' to make a personal statement within an idiom that draws from all your different sort of, you know, stuff that's in your head.

What kind of responses do you hear from your listeners – positive, negative?

Mostly positive [laughs]. I don't know – I don't read a lot of our – anything that's written. But the people we meet, and I really appreciate them, come up and show and [are] generally pretty positive.



What about other musicians, especially the traditionalists?

That's something that's really been great for us, one of the more rewarding things is getting to meet and be accepted by a lot of our heroes and our earlier musical inspiration – people like Del McCoury and Peter Rowan and these guys – and then play with these guys. It's almost like well, man, we're tempted to retire now, 'cause we just can't believe we've, you know, had that experience.

Is it terrifying, as well?

It's less and less. You just realized a lot. ...One of the main positive points in bluegrass music is...the accessibility of the musicians. It's like I remember I met Ralph Stanley, really at one of the first festivals I went to, so the people aren't terrifying – they're really just normal people.

I've talked about this with others in the field, I guess you'd say, but bluegrass, it seems, more than other musical areas, has this really strong, close-knit community of musicians.

Yeah, it does. It's always been that way. There's still that impromptu jam element, people just wanting to get together and play music. And then...there's this canon of traditional songs and folk songs that everyone knows, and so you can get together with someone you've never met, someone from a totally different background, different generation as you, and be able to play songs together. You know, it brings people together that otherwise would never, ever have anything to do with each other.

What do you think of collaborations like Chris Thile and Edgar Meyer touring together, that mix of classical and bluegrass?

... I think that's healthy... you know, it's a growing genre. I mean I haven't heard any of that stuff, so I couldn't speak about it, Chris Thile and Edgar Meyer, but I like both of those guys a lot [laughs] – I think it's great they're playing together.

Does Ted Pitney do the majority of your songwriting?

Yeah, he brings a lot of stuff to the band – I work with him. We co-write some stuff, and I've written a couple songs myself, but Ted usually plants a seed and then the whole band – it kind of gets filtered through the band and you know, we'll do a lot of editing kinda stuff, so it comes out more of a group effort.

What makes a good bluegrass song, both in terms of music and in terms of lyrics?

Oh, man, that's a hard question! [laughs] Um... I don't know. I mean, when I think of real, soulful, traditional bluegrass, a lot of it is just about the effort that people put into it. It's – people sing high in bluegrass, and it's not so much the pitch that's important, but it's the striving, the feeling, that's sort of the nature of the beast – it can't be effortless, it's gotta be you're giving it everything you've got.

It's the same thing with instrumental technique – it's very similar. And the words – it can be any – they're simple songs, but there's – one of my favorite things in bluegrass is the nostalgia, and there's so many songs about this longing for better times, you know, the old home, and childhood, and things that aren't there anymore, sort of the golden era, and that's good, it's positive music, you know, it's really starkly different from hip hop or a lot of other stuff you hear today, which has more of a negative element – realist.

There's a strong storytelling element in bluegrass, too, I think.

Yeah, definitely, with the ballads, and you know, how a lot of the old [songs] from England, and the folk songs have gotten into the genre, and then the Carter family contributions. Yeah, stories – is real important.

I was wondering what kind of performance setting do you and the rest of the band enjoy the most?

It's so different, like every day – we don't even know what to expect. One day we'll be playing a rock club, and then we'll be at a festival somewhere, you know – Kentucky, then we'll play the Ryman Auditorium, the Grand Old Opry, so it's, it's really neat, just getting to live in these different circumstances, and you don't know what to expect...

What do you think it is about mountains, and the geography of mountains, that makes mountain music what it is?

I don't know what it is, and why so many of the immigrants were drawn to the mountains, and then they say something about mountains being like a nest and kind of preserving a lot of the traditions within the sort of valleys. And you know, there's less... there's more isolation, there's less of this sort of cross blending of things, so it really keeps it pure. I've heard that before. I don't know what it is. It's inspirational, you know, the beauty, a lot of great music that's inspired by the mountains.

You all are working on a new project, and I wondered if you could tell me about that.

Sure. As of now, it's not titled, and it's probably gonna be more of an EP deal. It's gonna be like six, five or six songs, and then it'll bleed over into, or parts of some songs, will probably go into a full-length ... we're shooting for a fall release.



Same kind of music you've been playing, or will it have some new sounds?

Definitely new – definitely will have some new sounds. It'll be the same band – you'll definitely hear, it's basically the same thing, but it's from different approaches – definitely more song-oriented as opposed to instrumentals or fancy pickin', we're trying to do a more unique approach. It's hard to say, I mean, there's a lot of different influences on this new recording. We're tryin' to figure it ourselves, how it all sort of fits together and how it fits into the greater genre of bluegrass – but all I can say is it's true to ourselves and we're tryin' to do something that's honest and sort of the record we wanna make.

You have a new bass player – I was wondering why Drew left, and how the new bassist will impact your sound and what you're doing?

Drew left 'cause he got married, and he didn't wanna travel, and he was ready to settle down and he wanted to start a family, which we didn't want him to go, but could see how it's tough to balance our sort of lifestyle with that. The new guy who's comin' in is workin' real hard – fillin' Drew's shoes and learning a lot of Drew's parts and is contributing in his own right – he's a good musician too. But yeah, we're making the transition. It's fine.

One last, sort of big picture question: what's the future of bluegrass?

The future of bluegrass is – I know a lot of people think it's uncertain or it's gonna die out, with the sort of the older generations passin' on and there's no one left – but I think that's pretty far from the truth. I think it's really healthy, and there's so many bands out there that I can think of, not just professional bands, but any music that is just thriving, just in basic society, just around

Charlottesville alone. Throughout the country – we'll go out to California and it's just people can't get enough of gettin' together, festivals everywhere and people playin' and people pickin' up more instruments every day, it seems like, a new crop of people younger than me who want to learn this music, you know. It's hard to say where it'll go, but it's always gonna be around.

Dallas MORNING NEWS

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/ent/stories/DN-kingwilkie_0723g1GLWKND.2560b55.html

King Wilkie stays true to itself by expanding genre



As the band members grow and change, so does their sound

By [MARIO TARRADELL](#) / Staff Critic

Bluegrass music purists may be fuming, but King Wilkie frontman Reid Burgess makes no apologies for his band's stylistic switch.

Colin Douglas Gray

From left: Jake Hopping, [John McDonald](#), Ted Pitney, Abe Spear, Nick Reeb and Reid Burgess. The six-man group's 2004 debut CD, *Broke*, plays like a traditionalist's dream, full of fiery picking and a heaping helping of the genre's classic high lonesome sound. It was released on Rebel Records, the legendary bluegrass imprint. The disc scored King Wilkie a prestigious International Bluegrass Music Association award for emerging artists of the year. That's no small feat for a seemingly green posse of twentysomethings.

But youth is restless. Mr. Burgess and his instrumental pals – Ted Pitney, John McDonald, Jake Hopping, Nick Reeb and Abe Spear – wiped the blueprint clean and started anew when it came

time to record *Low Country Suite*, its debut for Zoe/Rounder. What they came up with turned them away from [Ralph Stanley](#) and [Bill Monroe](#) territory and drove them closer to the progressive landscape of Nickel Creek, [Alison Krauss](#) & Union Station and Yonder Mountain String Band.

"I don't think anybody wanted to go back in the studio and make the same bluegrass record," Mr. Burgess, 27, says by phone from Richmond, Va. "Over the course of about five years we did every arrangement of a bluegrass song that we could possibly think of. I'm not the same person I was then. It would make sense to not do the same type of songs. We were steering ourselves in that direction. We were writing songs that sounded this way. We didn't want to do the same thing again. It was starting to sound forced."

While the lyrical mood of *Low Country Suite* is melancholy, a vintage bluegrass hallmark, the music is lush and beautiful while remaining organic. Piano, organ, cello, harmonica, pedal steel, percussion and even a marxophone alter the tone. The record could work best in a concert hall instead of a farmhouse.

"It's hard to get excited about doing a second record that would sound just like the first," he says. "Hopefully we connect the dots between the two places. We didn't trade resources from one place to another."

Since its inception in Charlottesville, Va., four years ago, King Wilkie has endured only one personnel change. Although Mr. Burgess acknowledges the group members came from "different musical backgrounds," they joined forces because of their love for bluegrass. He also readily confesses that none of them found bluegrass too limiting.

"Not at all. To me it's just a question of doing it well. We just tried to do it the most natural way and keep that spirit. Not trying to ape anybody."

It was inevitable that other sonic influences would creep into King Wilkie. Mr. Burgess calls himself a fan of Ms. Krauss in the same breath that he mentions digging grunge-rock pioneer Nirvana. In the making of *Low Country Suite*, the sextet's appreciation for [Gillian Welch](#), Neil Young, the Byrds and the Rolling Stones emerged.

"There were a lot of people who loved what we did and they weren't necessarily coming from the real rigid bluegrass world," he says. "Hopefully some of them would come along with us with what we're doing now."

The move to a more textured sound, not to mention the more commercially savvy Zoe/Rounder, could indeed bring them a sizable fan base that wasn't there with *Broke*. Plus, Nickel Creek, Ms. Krauss & Union Station and Yonder Mountain String Band are all ensembles with youthful appeal.

Mr. Burgess, being the eternal idealist, keeps his mind on the bigger picture.

"What we try to do is keep moving upward," he says. "You always want to be striving for the next level, whatever that means, whether it's music or whatever. The important thing for us is to

keep ourselves interested. Evolution is what sustains us. That doesn't mean shooting for commercial success. That just means intuition."

Sure sounds like a purist talking.

COUNTRY STANDARD TIME

<http://www.countrystandardtime.com/d/concertreview.asp?xid=56>

King Wilkie is no fluke

Reviewed by Jeffrey B. Remz

King Wilkie came out of the box with good credibility in putting out bluegrass music - last year's "Broke" - that had a modern feel too.

A few things have changed since the Charlottesville, Va. - based sextet released "Broke" on Rebel. They have had a slight change of membership, but more importantly seem to opt for greater variety in their sound in concert.

And truth be told, it worked out just fine.

The band is part of the new breed of bluegrass where they definitely maintain a bluegrass sound - there's no electrics of course of any sort, but they do so with a brighter sound most of the time.

King Wilkie (they were named after Bill Monroe's horse!) played a long 85-minute set of material throughout their career (a good version of "In the Pines" from their "True Songs" CD and "Broke Down and Lonesome" from "Broke" were highlights), including a few choice covers.

They were not content to keep their repertoire only bluegrass. In fact, they even covered a blues song while acknowledging they are not a blues group. But they did the song justice.

John McDonald and Reid Burgess handled lead vocal chores with the affable McDonald, who has a good sense of humor, taking most of the leads perhaps because Burgess was under the weather.

McDonald has quick wit and is a strong storyteller. He also sings just fine while Burgess has a grittier delivery.

King Wilkie tackled some icons for covers including Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen ("Nebraska"), and they certainly put their own stamp on each of the songs to make the music even more interesting.

Drawing a good crowd of about 150 for the hump of the week, King Wilkie showed their acclaim was no fluke.

COUNTRY STANDARD TIME

<http://www.countrystandardtime.com/d/articlex.asp?xid=1023&p=2>

King Wilkie goes for Broke on "Low Country Suite"

By C. Eric Banister, July 2007

In a field consisting of Cherryholmes, Nothin' Fancy, Alecia Nugent and Pine Mountain Railroad, King Wilkie walked away as the IBMA's Emerging Artist of the Year in 2004 thanks to its debut "Broke." For many groups, this is the spot where they can see the Entertainer of the Year award dangling just ahead.

For King Wilkie, which just released "Low Country Suite," their debut for Rounder, it was both a crowning achievement and their bluegrass swan song of sorts.



"Since that time, we decided to slow down, get some day jobs. We wanted to be able to concentrate on our sound a little bit more," explains King Wilkie mandolin player and vocalist Reid Burgess. "Not that we didn't have a developed sound in 2004, but it to us it felt a little bit like we were aping other people."

"You can go and play Stanley Brothers songs because it's cool, and it feels good, but it's kind of like musical tourism in a way. It's fine, but when you're doing it for a living you kind of start feeling like you want to do something more remarkable as your own thing, even if it's still influenced by that other stuff. It's like regurgitation. We're not the next Stanley Brothers. We're not the next Bill Monroe, and we knew we never were."

Burgess grew up listening to a wide range of music, but it was bluegrass that took root.

"I liked a lot of early rock and roll. I liked Buddy Holly. I kind of swayed back and forth between rock and current rock, the normal rock stuff when I was in high school. I played classical piano, so I was like a classical enthusiast for a long time, but I was pretty all over the place."

"I went to the first (bluegrass) festival by accident," he says.

"That was like the total eye-opening experience. I don't think the other people I was there with had the same life-altering experience that I did, but it really spoke to me. It was bluegrass and that kind of old-timey music for many years after that for me.

"When I got into bluegrass, part of that was it was an alternative to any other alternative. It was completely different; it comes from a completely different place. I gravitated towards that almost like some young people gravitate towards other stuff just for the sake of it being different, like punk rock or something. I also think it was because I was looking for something that was less processed, more real."

That search for something real continued even after being recognized by peers as one of the best in the genre. As the band, which formed in Charlottesville, Va. in 2003 (band members actually met at Kenyon College in Ohio), began to prepare for their next project, their other musical influences began to creep in.

"I think it came out of songwriting more than anything else; I think it was pretty natural. There were a couple of songs that paved the way, where we started to get excited again about where things could go," Burgess says. "There were more transition songs and those could be heard on an EP we made, 'Tierra Del Fuego,' but a lot of what we do is still the same."

"It's the same kind of reason that we got into bluegrass - it shares a lot of the same themes. We kind of like the darker songs for some reason. The main thing is to capture a certain spirit, and that spirit is in bluegrass. There is a sublime-ness, a nostalgia, there's a striving. I guess we want people to hear us and for it to be real. People to hear us and get a sense of deep feeling, whatever that means."

One of those songs that signaled a stylistic shift was "Wrecking Ball," which appeared first on the EP and now, in a re-recorded version, on "Low Country Suite."

While he shares writing duties with guitarist Ted Pitney, Burgess wrote or co-wrote 8 of the 11 songs on "Low Country Suite." During their hiatus, Burgess concentrated on his songwriting as a discipline and often brought parts of songs to his band mates.

"Very rarely does something just happen, you kind of have to treat it as a task that you work at every day. That's how I am anyway. I enjoy writing songs and stuff will happen, but in order to get songs from the beginning, from a skeleton to having it good enough for my standards, you have to tinker a lot," he says.

"I have some of those little digital recording units, and I just lay some basic ideas out on them and then play them for the band, and we play through them together, and it grows from there."

The influences of the band, which consists of Burgess, Pitney, bassist Jake Hopping, vocalist/guitarist John McDonald, banjoist Abe Spear and multi-instrumentalist Nick Reeb range from the early pioneers of rock and roll to Gram Parsons and the Rolling Stones.

"Everyone comes from a pretty eclectic musical background that is in this band," he says. "We're just trying to do something that you can't get from listening to something else. I don't know where it comes from, I mean, it obviously comes from a lot of places, but by the time it gets filtered through everyone and everyone puts their little color on it. Then it sounds like...I don't know what to draw a comparison to, directly."

King Wilkie opted to remain true to bluegrass instrumentation while also adding in bits of organ, steel guitar and percussion. But that shouldn't alarm the bluegrass purists in their audience, Burgess says.

"If you look at the Bill Monroe recordings in the '50s, there was a period when he was recording with Owen Bradley, and actually in the mid-'40s before he had Flatt and Scruggs in his band, he had Sally Ann Forrester playing accordion, and in the '50s, he had organ and vibes, and he recorded with strings, electric guitar, lap steel. We had a lot of that stuff lying around, so we just wanted to have fun."

Even though the parameters of bluegrass can begin to feel confining, King Wilkie's stylistic shift has less to do with freedom and more to do with enthusiasm.

"It's not about needing to be free, but you have to let yourself be excited about it. We were so excited when we were making our first record, and we were so excited for the couple years before that when we were studying and learning bluegrass," Burgess says.

"And then you go out to make your second record something, and it's hard to get that level of excitement that you had for your first one, you know what I mean, the level of enthusiasm."

"That's why a lot of people's second records aren't so good because they just don't have that initial thrill, and I think it's healthy and it's good to free yourself up and not worry about having to repeat yourself because I don't think any of us really wanted to go back and make the same record that we made the first time."

Part of upping the excitement levels was bringing in a producer that wasn't really known for working in bluegrass.

"We were opening for Ralph Stanley at Town Hall in New York City and a producer named, coincidentally, Scott Litt, not Jim Scott, who was from a completely not bluegrass school - he produced most of REM's records - he came to the merch table and started talking to us and was really excited and wanted to produce us," he says. "We were intrigued by this and had a dialogue going with him for a while, and it got us in the process of looking at other people who had mixed or produced other kinds of records."

"So, we thought we were going to be working with Scott, but Scott couldn't do it. He didn't have the time to record when we wanted to do it, we were really dying to do it. A name that came up

when we were looking around was Jim Scott who's a guy that's known mostly for mixing and engineering records, but I got on the phone with him because the label sent him our 'Tierra Del Fuego' EP, and we just had a really good talk, and he really liked it, and I really liked him based

on some of the stuff that we talked about, so we decided to go that way."



During this time the band also switched from the venerable bluegrass record label Rebel to the Rounder Records imprint Zoe.

"We had a couple of companies that actually were interested based on the demos that we had made, and I guess they had heard us live or whatever. Rounder seemed like a good fit for us," Burgess says. "We were not really looking around, but we had finished our record with

Rebel, and were thinking about starting our own label, which the EP is pretty much on our own label, Three Feathers, but Rounder was interested in us so sometime in 2006, we signed with them."

Whether or not the bluegrass fan base chooses to follow the band along into new territory remains to be seen, but the members of King Wilkie are secure in the fact that regardless of the outcome, they have made the album they wanted to make.

"We knew there was a risk, but I think we were at a point where it was more important to us. It's not like we were king of the road or making a lot of money, you know, so it's just a question of following our hearts."

"That was more important to us and the reality of it is that a lot of people still think what we do is good, so there's value in that, and there's an audience there for us so we're happy about that. We're grateful."



COUNTRY STANDARD TIME

<http://www.countrystandardtime.com/d/articlex.asp?xid=542&p=2>

King Wilkie goes for broke 🖨️

By John Lupton, May 2004

The words "bluegrass" and "epiphany" rarely seem to keep close company with each other, or at least, not usually in the vocabularies of those who don't follow bluegrass music closely. But it was just such an epiphany, a revelation, that took hold of college roommates Reid Burgess, a Wisconsin native, and Ted Pitney, a New Yorker by birth, when they decided to take in a local bluegrass festival, neither of them having experienced the music previously.

"The two of us, we met at Kenyon College, out in the middle of nowhere, in Ohio," Burgess says, "We sort of one day found ourselves at that bluegrass festival, and that made a big impression on us. I think in high school, I had heard Béla Fleck and some of the instrumental stuff. I had a high school buddy who was pretty into that. What really grabbed me was the vocals and just being part of the whole bluegrass culture. It would have been my junior year, so I would say right about 2000, maybe 1999. We were pretty obsessed or at least I was those last few years

of college with bluegrass, just pretty obsessive about listening to bluegrass. We just really became addicted to it."

Improbable as it may seem, from that standing start, Burgess and Pitney plunged headlong into the music and, following a post-graduation move to the Charlottesville, Va. area, began to assemble King Wilkie.

They developed a following in the Shenandoah Valley and, in 2003, cut their own independent, self-produced release "True Songs." The disc served as their introduction and "promo disc" to the promoters they began attracting the attention of at places like the annual International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) convention in Louisville.

A scant four years, later the band just released their first major release, "Broke," on Virginia-based Rebel Records and has created a substantial buzz as one of the up-and-coming traditionally oriented bands, with a style, respect and innovative spirit for the music that Bill Monroe, the Father of Bluegrass, himself would likely have appreciated.

And, as a matter of fact, the band's name is straight out of the Monroe legend, albeit a relatively obscure part. When not out on the road, Monroe found solace and regeneration on his Nashville area farm, and King Wilkie was the name of his favorite horse. For Burgess and his bandmates, it was simply a distinctive way to acknowledge Monroe as the ultimate source.

"I think it just has to do with us wanting to be as traditional as we could, especially when we were starting out. Bill's always been sort of an idol to us, and we were just looking to find some sort of connection there."

Monroe, of course, passed away in September 1996, long before Burgess and Pitney became aware of bluegrass, let alone Monroe himself, and Burgess wonders what might have been.

"I didn't get into bluegrass until well after he was gone - unfortunately. I wish (I could have met him) - that's a dream."

Burgess, the band's mandolin player, and Pitney, the lead guitarist, were both academically oriented toward music in college.

"Music has always been important, I'm sure, to both of us," he recalls, "(Ted) was a music major, I was a music minor. He was a jazz guitar player. I had studied classical piano, and we both played in sort of a rock band."

The mandolin, though, was new to him, more or less.

"I actually did own a mandolin, but that was because when I actually got to school, I was a guitar player and like, everyone on the hallway had a guitar, and played the guitar, so I thought I'd try to get a mandolin. I had seen (REM) use (a mandolin) in a rock context. So, I had one, but I really didn't know how to play anything on it."

Rounding out the band (all are currently between 21 and 26 years old) are Drew Breakey (bass), John McDonald (guitar), Nick Reeb (fiddle) and Abe Spear (banjo).

Burgess says it was more or less a sort of "bluegrass gravity" that drew them together.

"Bluegrass is such a small community, that that's what brought us together - bluegrass festivals, IBMA, and, " he says, pausing to laugh, "Over the internet, actually, kind of random. Abe is from Lexington, N.C. John's from Nashville, Tenn. Drew is from Maryland, and Nick is from Ohio. I guess there just aren't that many guys our age going around who are really interested in playing this kind of music, so we just sort of found each other. (We) had not really wanted to have a band. We weren't ready for a real band. I guess we were recruiting them, yeah. I think we came across one or two of them by chance, you know, and the rest (was like), 'well, we need a lead singer, we need a fiddle player', so we kept our eyes open for them."

Though he and Pitney couldn't have known it at the time, that pivotal Ohio bluegrass festival would also carry a critical link to their burgeoning later success.

"I remember John Hartford was there. He made a really big impression on me, and then listening to his records, he was always sort of singing about his heroes and tracing those people who made a big impression on him, like Benny Martin and Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs and so just tracing back John Hartford's heroes sort of led me that way."

Part of Hartford's band that day, as he was throughout much of Hartford's career, was Bob Carlin, known not only for his own solo banjo and vocal albums, but as an archivist, historian and producer as well.

And, as it turned out, it was Carlin behind the glass producing "Broke."

Burgess recalls that first encounter with him, though.

"They were telling a story about Dan Emmett, who was, back in the 19th century, like a minstrel songwriter. He wrote the lyrics for the song 'Dixie.' So (Carlin) went into a little spiel about that. That's actually where (Kenyon College) is, where Dan Emmett was from, out in Mount Vernon, Ohio. (Bob) told that story, and Ted and I and a couple other kids from the school cheered and stood up, and he remembered it years later when we brought that up."

The material on "Broke" certainly delves deep into classic bluegrass and country fare, from Jimmie Davis ("Where The Old Red River Flows") to Jimmie Rodgers ("Blue Yodel #7"), but both Burgess and Pitney demonstrate a deft touch at creating original music that has that "old sound." "Goodbye So Long", for example, is a Burgess song that echoes the "Stanley Sound."

"I think there's a weird harmony on it. I don't know where I came up with that. It's pretty much a straight-ahead, Stanley-type traditional country song. The lyrics, I don't know if they sound modern or not, but I guess that's what I was thinking about when I wrote that."

Pitney's "Lee & Paige," which emulates the classic country "death ballads" is, Burgess says, the band's tribute to the tradition of "brother duets."

"John, who's sort of the lead singer in the band, he's really into the (brother acts), like the Stanley Brothers for one, and he's taught us a whole lot about that duet harmony, but definitely we listened to a lot of the Monroe Brothers."

Perhaps the most ambitious aspect of "Broke," though, is the incorporation of the declining art of yodeling, and they take a shot at it not only on Rodgers' "Blue Yodel," but on "Sparkling Brown Eyes" (known by some as "Ramshackle Shack") as well. Although the publicity material for the album notes that both Webb Pierce and Wanda Jackson recorded hit versions of the song, bluegrass fans of long standing know it as a signature tune of the late New England bluegrass legend, Joe Val, and Burgess acknowledges that the King Wilkie version goes directly back to Val's.

"I haven't even heard any other recording of that song, actually, other than the Joe Val one, and we definitely listened to that. I mean, there's only two (Joe Val) albums I have, I think that's all that's available on Rounder, so he's definitely one of our favorites. I think we heard Bob Paisley and the Southern Grass at one festival. They made a huge impression on me and on all of us, and we saw...where they were playing another festival in Arcadia (Md.), it was going to have the Paisleys... and we just ended up talking to people at that festival, and some of them were saying, 'Joe Val, you've got to listen to Joe Val.'"

And, in fact, it is Burgess himself who does the yodeling, though he admits he's got a ways to go before feeling like he's got a firm grip on it.

"I'm still learning how to do it. I don't know, just imitating records, I guess. It's kind of a weird thing, I'm learning that it's - I think the way that I did it on the record is all wrong. It's not really a singing thing, it's an esophagus (thing). It's like a break in the voice. It's tricky. It's not like singing."

Yodeling in country music, of course, more or less begins with Rodgers, and Burgess again credits Monroe as the link.

"Only as sort of a 'filter-through' from Monroe and all of the other bluegrass guys, but I have a Jimmie Rodgers CD that I listen to now, and he's the best yodeler of anybody. I think Bill Monroe recorded that 'Blue Yodel # 7', and I think Dave Freeman is the one who played that for us. I hadn't heard anyone do that, so that was kind of neat."

Dave Freeman, a legend in his own right since founding County Records some 40 years ago, followed that by developing Rebel Records into what is, along with Rounder and Sugar Hill, one of the "Big Three" among bluegrass-oriented labels. In the pre-internet era Freeman's retail outlet, County Sales was the primary source for both classic and new bluegrass and old time music recordings. For thousands of fans of these hard-to-get records, not only was County just about the only place to get them, but the regular County newsletters were highly respected for the reviews, most of them written by Freeman himself, that were stripped of the usual sugarcoating. Good or bad, Dave Freeman called 'em as he saw 'em.

Rebel Records, as it happens, is based in Charlottesville, but Burgess maintains that he and Pitney didn't have that in mind when they were looking for a place to put down their newly acquired bluegrass roots.

"We sort of had a romantic vision of coming to Virginia, the Blue Ridge Mountains and learning from the elders, you know? We knew, like, that Stelling Banjo was here, and we assumed there was a whole bunch of players, which turned out, we never really found too many. It was also a college town, we kind of liked that aspect. (Rebel's presence was a) complete coincidence. I think we knew that Rebel was here when we moved here. At that time, (though), we weren't thinking, like, 'Oh, yeah.'"

Burgess laughs, though, as he recounts the night that fate intervened, and as they were rolling through a set one night, they realized that Freeman was in the audience.

"It was great...he showed up at one of our shows, and he was one of the only people there, sitting right in the front row. Very scary. And we talked to him. He stayed the whole night. It was late, it was like a college bar kind of thing, so we were there playing until past midnight. He stayed the whole time, and we couldn't believe it."

Getting the chance to record for their new "hometown label" has been rewarding enough, but Burgess recognizes that having Freeman in their corner validates their music on several levels.

"Dave is the best. He just has so much integrity, he's real free, with us at least, in working with our business relationship. He wants to help us, he loves it, it's almost like Rebel, and doing all this bluegrass, these reissues and all that, it's almost a hobby for him. I'm sure he cares about making money and the bottom line and all that, but he really cares a lot about the quality, he loves it, and it's his life."

Another striking feature of "Broke" is the band's recreation on disc of the classic bluegrass performance style of opening and closing the show with a short, hard-driving instrumental "theme." The tune here is "40 West" by Ralph Lewis, and Burgess agrees that they were looking to turn back the years.

"That was the idea...We didn't have any other instrumentals, really, on the album and thought it would be just a throwback to yesteryear and how they did the shows. Maybe some of the (older) albums had that structure. I know Bob (Carlin) was kind of (concerned) - not everyone thought it was a good idea. We kind of had to twist his arm to do that, but I think it's pretty cool."

Burgess recognizes that he and his bandmates are something of a demographic exception, and that mid-twentysomethings these days aren't generally thought of as being "bluegrass friendly," but he says that, for each of the six of them, though they're well versed in the more contemporary alternative bands like REM, bluegrass just happens to be the path they've chosen, they have no regrets and are actually finding that the Monroe Music is gradually acquiring it's own youthful cachet.

"I think it's definitely having a little surge in popularity. I would definitely not put it in the 'cool' category yet, but we definitely think it's cool, and we're trying to help some other people turn on.

To me, it's just the power of the music and the purity of it. It's not like anything else you hear on the radio, you know? That's what appeals to me, but I would hope other people would hear it, and hear, at least, a lot of the bluegrass that I like, and I think anybody would like it if they heard it. They just need to have that chance to hear it."

Some bluegrass purists complain that many incoming younger talents (with Nickel Creek often cited as the "poster band") stretch the music beyond recognition, while others note that some do little more than recreate - mechanically, soullessly and note-for-note - the historic recordings of the '40s and '50s.

King Wilkie, Burgess emphasizes, strives to honor the tradition while maintaining the same joy in making music that Monroe and his contemporaries lived for.

"I hope people don't get the impression that what we're doing is trying to preserve the music as a museum relic. The stuff we like is that stuff out of the '40s and '50s, and I know there's a lot of other kinds in bluegrass that we didn't follow as close as we did that older stuff. Not that we don't like it, there's room for it, but that wasn't what we were drawn to. Even though we work in that older format, we're trying to do what we do...The songs are different, the attitude is different, but we're just working in that format, trying to breathe new life into it."

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After two years of touring in support of 2004's "Broke," bluegrass traditionalist act King Wilkie found renewed inspiration listening to country rock and the sounds of Nick Drake, Nico and Leonard Cohen. The Virginia sextet hasn't abandoned its roots, as evidenced by the straight-up bluegrass of "Wrecking Ball," but it has embraced a more sophisticated and introspective approach with "Low Country Suite." Songwriters Reid Burgess, John McDonald and Ted Pitney explore their dark sides on lovely, melancholy tracks like "Oh My Love" and "The Raising of the Patriarchs." And while "Broke" bursts with the raw energy of banjo and mandolin, the material here unfurls more deliberately. Relaxed charmers "Angeline" and "Captivator" demonstrate how adeptly King Wilkie has fused elements of country rock, pop and folk to achieve a sound a wider audience can appreciate.—Alexandra Cahill

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Album Review

Having built a reputation as a bluegrass band to watch out for, King Wilkie decided that it was time to see what else they could do for their follow-up to 2004's *Broke*. The answer is plenty -- there's still some great traditional and progressive bluegrass to be had from this Virginia sextet, but *Low Country Suite* presents a more well-rounded -- though still mostly acoustic -- Americana that only the most die-hard bluegrass purists among the group's fan base might object to.

Reference points are fairly easy to pinpoint: the usual gang of late-'60s country-rockers (minus most of the rock), the less navel-gazing of the introspective singer/songwriters of the '70s (plus some punch), and the more recent crop of hybrid bands that have successfully merged those same influences and put a modernist spin on them. King Wilkie's change in direction -- more personalized, often moodier songs, flirtations with pop, more challenging song structures -- would not have worked if they weren't crafting material good enough to take the band to that next level, and they are: "Angeline" is a shambling honky tonker fueled by scurrying fiddles and soulful steel, while "Stone & Steel" is of the opposite temperament, a whisper of a ballad whose vocal harmonies and foreboding melody sum up just how willing King Wilkie are to visit new places. They probably could have continued to become an even better bluegrass band, but King Wilkie now have something more original and lasting to offer. Bill Monroe would forgive them.

~ Jeff Tamarkin, All Music Guide