

Emmitt-Nershi Band

***New Country Blues* (SCI Fidelity Records)**

With years of collective experience under their belts, Drew Emmitt and Bill Nershi exemplify the forward-thinking modern bluegrass musician. As linchpins of two legendary jam-bands -- Drew with Leftover Salmon, Bill with the String Cheese Incident--both men have done the stadium-filling, high-profile rock 'n' roll thing to perfection. Along the way, however, they've honed their songwriting and playing chops and studied the bluegrass, rock and jazz masters they admire. Above all, Drew and Bill have shared a commitment to keeping music human-scaled and honest. Those qualities are found in abundance on their latest and greatest collaboration, *New Country Blues*--11 tunes made in Newgrass heaven.

Actually, the duo cut *New Country Blues* not far from home, in Colorado. Drew, who was born in Tucson, AZ and grew up in the heart of bluegrass country in Nashville, had been busy touring with Bill as the Emmitt-Nershi Band and had even done some reunion gigs with Leftover Salmon. Meanwhile, Bill had come to the Centennial State by way of New York State and New Jersey. Like his mandolin-playing bandmate, Bill had taken up bluegrass after catching a memorable edition of the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in the early 1980s. Back then he'd intended to return to New York, but the lure of blue-sky bluegrass in Colorado proved irresistible.

For *New Country Blues*, these two pickers went to write songs over a long weekend in Estes Park, CO. "We wrote the songs in three days," Drew says. "We holed up in this house and we just sat and came up with these tunes. It was a really smooth process. We bring out a lot of good things in each other musically, and we do well playing off each other."

Bill agrees, but he admits he wasn't totally sure about the outcome of their collaboration in Estes Park. "I was a little nervous, because I hadn't really written a lot of material at one time before," he says from his home in Nederland, CO. "But it was real spontaneous, and both of us were willing to say yes to the other person's ideas."

Perhaps because Drew and Bill had cut their teeth in the somewhat more fast-moving world of their respective bands, they were willing to catch ideas on the fly and turn them into fresh music for *New Country Blues*. As Drew laughs, "Playing with bluegrass pickers, it's not like the big ego of rock 'n' roll." Growing up in Nashville in the 1970s, he was aware of bluegrass and old-time string music but was more into Outlaw country and rock 'n' roll. "I never played bluegrass until I came to Colorado," he says. (Today he lives in Crested Butte with his wife and two children.)

Each man describes an epiphany in which they realized their true mission in life. For Bill it was Telluride and the inescapable influence of the *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* album his father bought upon its 1972 release. Drew says it was a combination of receiving a mandolin from his mother (he'd already been playing guitar) and seeing the legendary progressive bluegrass band Hot Rize. Drew began to explore the music in earnest, and played in his first band--Emily Cantrell and the Porphyry Mountain Boys. (Porphyry Mountain is a noted Colorado peak, in Jamestown.)

Like the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack nearly 30 years later, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* introduced an entire generation to bluegrass. These days, of course, bluegrass is everywhere, adapting and evolving in strange, wonderful new ways. The Emmitt-Nershi Band takes the music in unexpected directions on *New Country Blues*, and Drew and Bill are very conscious of the need for the kind of tradition-rooted experimentation that you'll find in their music.

"We're coming at it from a different angle than a lot of bluegrass musicians do," Bill says. Certainly, *New Country Blues* contains some blues (on the title track), an assortment of intelligently conceived and beautifully executed instrumentals, and inspired songs that make it clear that these men have learned a thing or two about writing since their days living on Salmon and String Cheese.

"There's fewer boundaries in this band than in our big bands, and more room for experimentation," Drew says. "And I do a lot more playing, solo-wise, than I have on any record. On my three solo records I hadn't taken a lot of solos."

The title track came out of a simple need. "We'd kind of written a lot of tunes over a few days, and I was sittin' there thinking, you know, we don't have a fast bluegrass tune on this record," Drew says. "And I'd never written a song in F-sharp, and started just playing this riff. Literally, within five minutes the song was written."

A similar spirit pervades the entirety of *New Country Blues*. Andy Thorn and Tyler Grant add guitar, banjo and bass, while Keith Moseley steps in on bass on "I Come from the Country" and frees up Tyler to shine on flat-picked guitar. The chord changes are sharp and a little out of the ordinary. And in keeping with the spirit of Newgrass pioneers such as David Grisman and Sam Bush, Drew and Bill sneak in some jazzy moments and lush harmonies.

It's a record of big ideas and subtle musical touches, and Drew says they've had a blast playing the new tunes for live audiences. (Emmitt and Nershi started touring together back in fall 2007, and since then have played for audiences all over the country.) They're planning shows in the Northeast for fall 2009, and they'll feature the new tunes-- gorgeous songs on the order of "These Days" along with adventurous instrumentals such as "Mango Tango" and "Surfing the Red Sea."

It's the collective spirit that counts, and the Emmitt-Nershi Band seem to have plenty of it. Their songful moments are balanced by the kind of virtuosic but distinctly un-flashy picking that comes out of experience. You can't fake the blues feeling in "New Country Blues," and you get the feeling that these guys really believe in the possibilities that America grants musicians of their questing bent. It's a new country, and Drew Emmitt and Bill Nershi are proud to blaze a trail to find it.