

Greensky Bluegrass: By Their Own Definitions



By: [Sarah Hagerman](#)

"I think almost all the guys in the band got into bluegrass the way I did, through the Grateful Dead and [The Pizza Tapes](#)," [Anders Beck](#) of [Greensky Bluegrass](#) relates. "All of a sudden there's Garcia and [Grisman](#) and from [The Pizza Tapes](#) you get to Grisman Quintet and you hear this guitar player and you're like, 'Who the hell is that?' Then you start listening to [Tony Rice](#) recordings, and then from there [Béla Fleck](#) and you just keep going back and back to Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs. That's how a lot of people got into bluegrass. I don't know if Jerry Garcia got enough credit for that."



Greensky Bluegrass by Eric Kinnally

No matter how the journey begins, the bluegrass resin seeps in deep and locks in your bones. In some circles, Garcia hasn't gotten enough credit for inspiring that addictive research, but the musicians of Greensky - **Paul Hoffman** (mandolin), **Dave Bruzza** (guitar), **Michael Devol** (bass), **Michael Arlen Bont** (banjo) and Beck (dobro) – are attracting a growing fanbase that recognizes a similarly bold line of attack. That no-holds-barred element is an essential component to their sound:

"I love listening to clean, super polished bluegrass, but after awhile it's too much," Beck divulges. "I like mistakes and people taking risks. We like to improvise and see where things are going to wind up. I don't think we are *trying* to do that, it's just our collective backgrounds have come from that world, so it comes out when we play. Our fans are accepting of that middle ground. They kind of trust us and let us do what we want to do, which is exciting to me as a musician, because we can play super fast bluegrass shows or if we want to get weird we can get weird. We're starting to realize we can fit it all in one show. And it's exciting that people like what we do because chances are we would be doing it anyway."

The Kalamazoo Shuffle

As Hoffman describes it, Michigan is musically rich, but is comparatively scarce on bluegrass. "I think Michigan has a good folk scene. There's a lot of great Americana and acoustic music going on. But I wouldn't say there's a lot of bluegrass. People really

like [bluegrass] here, but Michigan is not like Colorado, where you can count a bluegrass band for every finger and every toe, and it's not like the Nashville or North Carolina bluegrass scenes either."

This geographical reality helps inform the band's distinctive sound, according to Beck.



Greensky Bluegrass at NWSS with Nershi & YMSB by Kinnally

"Bill Monroe once said, and I'm paraphrasing, 'Take the music I made and don't play it just like I play it. Take the song and make it your own.' We're really trying to make it our own," says Beck. "There's enough bands that have paved the way – what [Yonder](#) is doing, even [Leftover Salmon](#) or [String Cheese Incident](#) - and Greensky has what I like to call, 'The Kalamazoo Shuffle.' It's got a pulse to it and it's kind of got a lope to it as well, a shuffle. I haven't really heard anybody playing in that style except for

Greensky, and this was from before I joined the band, talking from an outsider's perspective. It has to do with the fact that it comes from Michigan, not from Kentucky or Colorado."

As part of the initial trio that formed Greensky in 2000, Hoffman found his musical feet alongside Bruzza and Bont. Inspired by David Grisman, Hoffman was just beginning to learn the mandolin when he met the future members of the band. "The growing process of the band was the growing process of our own instrumentation," he explains. "Dave had only been playing the guitar for a little while; Mike had only been playing the banjo for a little while. So, we started grooving to bluegrass together. I always felt like I was in the right place at the right time, deciding to play the mandolin and then meeting those guys. I never had planned to stay in Kalamazoo for longer than two years, but here I am eight years later."

Beck began playing the dobro in Colorado around the same time after encountering a workshop at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. He lays out the scene: "I was living in Durango, Colorado and crossing over from playing jam band music on electric guitar to acoustic music, but I realized I wasn't very good at flatpicking. I stumbled across [that] dobro workshop while camping in my friend's yard, and I almost dropped my Bloody Mary - I couldn't believe what I was hearing. There was [Jerry Douglas](#), [Sally Van Meter](#), [Rob Ickes](#) and [Randy Kohrs](#). It was amazingly clear to me that that was what I wanted to play. It is the electric guitar of acoustic instruments. It has sustain - you can actually hold notes. You can't really do that on an acoustic guitar. It helped crossover from the electric guitar sort of vibe, to sustain those Trey notes [*laughs*]. A dobro can't quite do that but it's got more of a rock and roll feel to it."

Devol, a classically-trained cellist, joined Greensky on bass in fall 2004, after the departure of bassist Chris Carr and dobro player Al Bates, who left after recording *Less Than Supper* in May of that year. Through the festival circuit, they struck up a friendship with Beck, who would officially join the band in 2008 after having been in [Broke Mountain Bluegrass Band](#) and [Wayword Sons](#) (Benny Galloway's songwriting showcasing band). Beck cites how Galloway's influence played a role in his decision to approach Greensky. "After playing for two years with Burle, I sort of learned what it is that I really like about particularly good songwriters," says Beck. "My take on music after that is, lots of notes are all well and good, and the perfect solo is great, but it really comes down to the words and the melodies - that's what connects with people. The songwriting was the main thing that really appealed to me about Greensky."



Greensky Bluegrass

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Photo by: Eric Kinnally

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-Anders Beck

Dancing About Architecture

When speaking of the band's songwriting, Hoffman is very conscious of staying true to 21st century realities while still honoring their musical heritage. Carving a unique niche in this broad scene is a challenge they profoundly understand.

"When it comes to writing a really traditional sounding bluegrass song you're sort of limited because they are all pretty much in a basic form, which is a big part of the music and the storytelling through the generations," says Hoffman. "But, if you're writing a song with the same melody that was written for a song about being buried in the mountain and you are trying to sing about something current, say rising oil prices or property value inflation, it's a little odd. Nonetheless, I think it's important, because an oral tradition is how this music all originally started."

"Playing quote-unquote bluegrass music, it's always been a little strange to me," adds Beck. "We're generally happy. We're not that

lonesome and we're not that blue, and none of our relatives worked in a coal mine. We go swimming in Lake Michigan and skiing in the winter, but we've got to sing those songs to respect that tradition. It's a generational gap of sorts, and I think that comes through in a lot of our songs."

Greensky negotiate these gaps with skill, sounding timeless without being strictly confined, current without sacrificing a compelling old-soul timbre – killer Springsteen covers and all. Eight years into their career they have evolved into a band that can seamlessly play wicked improv as well as authentically moving original songs that draw from a well of varied acoustic springs, not just bluegrass.

Although understandably hesitant to slap an easy label on themselves, sometimes just finding words to describe a musical approach is the key, moving beyond the prescribed tags to define a new parameter. Hoffman suggests the phrase "new acoustic roots" and Beck agrees.

"It's a really good way to describe it. When you try to put music into words it's always a little strange, but in five words or less you have to describe to someone what the music you play is like," offers Beck. "Bluegrass is already in our name, and we play bluegrass instruments, so we're allowed to get away with that for a little while, but I'm sure they'll be an uproar at some point with someone saying, 'Well, they're not bluegrass.' We're creating our own songs within a timeless genre of acoustic music, which is an easy way to say bluegrass without getting in too much trouble. The message we are trying to convey is that this a new take on something that's been around forever."



Anders Beck by Eric Kinnally

This is evident on ***Five Interstates*** (released September 9, 2008 on Big Blue Zoo). The record marks a definitive growth ring on the trunk of the band, not only as the first time recording with the latest lineup, but also as original songwriters, branching out beyond the breakdowns. "I think we've avoided a lot of the road song traps that are out there," Beck says. "It's easy to write clichéd songs about traveling and driving around, but that's what we've been doing for the past year so there's no way it couldn't be about that."



Paul Hoffman by Eric Kinnally

"We notice a lot of themes of time and distance," Hoffman adds. "It's sort of the way I'm measuring my life, with my songwriting. Many of the songs tend to have these underlying tones of how much time we spend making this living and how many miles we travel. There's a theme of *carpe diem*."

That traveling ribbon weaves in various shades and strengths from "Against the Days," where the instrumental shuffle moves over a soft drum skitter by Bruzza and the listener is urged to, "Raise a glass to each moment/ In a race against time," to a couple stellar Galloway tunes ("Train Junkie," co-penned with Beck, and "What's Left of the Night") to Hoffman's "The Reverend," a song whose mood speaks to the uncertainties ("Is there love enough to save us?/ Will it find us out here?") in the face of that fear. Hoffman illuminates, "I was chatting with [Seth Bernard](#) about songwriting and how our

processes varied. He is an ordained minister, hence, 'A couple beers with the Reverend/ am I safe from the night?' I'm coming to terms with the lyrics every time I sing it. I suppose the song is mostly about fear. There is an underlying war theme and images of the burden, of the responsibility."

The album was recorded over five days in a cabin in Hoxeyville, Michigan with **Tim Carbone** ([Railroad Earth](#)) producing for the second time (he also filled that role for 2006's *Tuesday Letter*). Both Beck and Hoffman spoke highly of Carbone.

"For me, it's easy to trust him and his vision," Hoffman says. "To have someone listening, especially someone we trust as much as Tim, is priceless. So everything was the same [as *Tuesday*] – except, of course, this album has Anders on it. Same place, same high speed intense pace." That approach captures that snapping spark in the heart of Greensky's music. Striking in its immediate earthy vigor with a focus on a distant horizon expanding ahead, its quintessential asphalt thunder rumbling in a contemporary acoustic light.

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Photo of Greensky Bluegrass with Tim Carbone by: Daniel Davis

Looking Back, Thinking Forward

Logging serious mileage on the van, Beck reflects back, trying to sift through the memorable moments of a busy year: "We've played somewhere over 150 shows. A big highlight was opening up the Rothbury Festival in our home state of Michigan. For a couple of weeks leading up to the festival, it seemed like that was all anybody was talking about in Michigan, so we were really fired up about it. I've been in bands where getting asked to play first is sort of a bullshit way that the promoter justifies giving you a crappy time slot. At Rothbury, it seemed like they wanted to have us do it as a nod to the Michigan music scene and to all our home state fans that were embracing this new festival. I give the organizers a lot of credit for that. We didn't know what to expect, but we were pleasantly blown away by the six to seven thousand that showed up for our set."

All those festivals feel like home no matter where we are. It's really awesome for all of us in this band to start to develop relationships with these people, like Drew Emmitt or Railroad Earth, to become friends with those guys on a level that's beyond being musical acquaintances. I really treasure that.

-Paul Hoffman

It seemed almost every weekend this summer saw the band at a festival, from Hoxeyville to Rothbury to Northwest String Summit to Yarmony Grass, in addition to a solid touring schedule in between.

"You know at these festivals, whatever this genre [we play] is, whether its bluegrass or not, we run into the same people all over the place," Hoffman muses. "I saw [Bill Nershi](#) and [Drew Emmitt](#) like every other week. We did a whole tour with Railroad Earth in June and at the end we were like, 'Wish we could see each other more often.' But we're always running into each other, one way or another. All those festivals feel like home no matter where we are. It's really awesome for all of us in this band to start to develop relationships with these people, like Drew Emmitt or Railroad Earth, to become friends with those guys on a level that's beyond being musical acquaintances. I really treasure that."



Greensky Bluegrass at Telluride by Eric Kinnally

It is a close-knit scene, bound by shared musical passions and genuine support. For Beck, who now splits his time between Colorado and Michigan, String Summit was special in terms of witnessing that camaraderie.

"I got to have my two worlds colliding, my Colorado musical history – the Yonder guys and Nershi and Drew and then getting to introduce Greensky into that realm. Next thing that I know, there's Dave [Bruzza] walking down the road with Vince [Herman] at three in the morning! It's based out of a mutual respect, which is exciting to the band. Those guys are being really welcoming to us and I've watched it happen in Colorado a lot. You know it started with [Hot Rize](#), and they were really encouraging to the Leftover guys in their early years and then Leftover was helping Yonder out when they were just a small band. It's just really cool to see that generation being really excited about what we're doing."

"[Our] fall tour was great," Beck continues, hitting on a few memories. "The Asheville Brewgrass Festival, although we hadn't been to Asheville in awhile, it really felt like our crowd - bluegrass fans that like beer, people who love music and love to party. Also, playing a show opening for [Sam Bush](#) in Ohio. He's always been a hero to me, and to most of us I would think. He seemed to really dig what we were doing. As far as the show we did with Burle at The Oriental Theatre in Denver, we were lucky enough to get to ask Burle to put something together for a support act, and even luckier in his follow-through. Having him, Sally Van Meter - who I learned tons from while trying to figure out the dobro - and my good buddy [Robin Davis](#), three musicians I respect immensely, warm up the crowd for us was awesome."



Greensky Bluegrass :: NYE 2007 > 2008 by Eric Kinnally

"It [might] sound stupid," Beck says, "but our fans were a highlight of this year. All over the country, people seem to be going out on a limb and embracing what we do. It's been really great to return to a bunch of different places this year and see the growth in the size of the crowd and hear from people that 'sold us' to their friends. It's cool to know the passion is there and helps to justify all the work we put into it."

It's not too late to make New Year's plans, and Greensky in K-zoo sounds mighty tempting based on Beck's description.

"The show is a huge hometown throw-down. There was a giant energy in the theatre last year and it gets all of us fired up. I've been hearing that a bunch of fans are flying in from all over the country for the show, which is a really good feeling. There are a lot of great shows going on everywhere and knowing that a bunch of people are choosing to be with us is a real honor. I can pretty much guarantee that no one will leave disappointed!"

Hoffman delves further: "The event is sponsored by our Michigan family bands, [Steppin In It](#) and [Daisy May & Seth Bernard](#). Surrounded by close friends, family and fans, we've been ringing in the last couple years with class. There will certainly be some collaborating and some tricks up our sleeve. Although, last year we didn't get the balloons to drop until twenty minutes after; that's my excuse for being a little behind all year. Hopefully this year, we'll get a string technician to make it all go smoothly."

Beck looks ahead to 2009 with an open mind.

"Most of my hopes revolve around politics, the direction of our country. As for the band, we are just going to keep doing what we do and try to focus on making good, unique music and playing it for as many people as possible."

Hard to say what's in store for this country in 2009, although many of us have hope. Greensky's story will be unfolding on this canvas, as they mark pages with dedicated, unrestricted strokes - defining this journey on their own terms, culling their sound from an honest black top, and inspiring excited dispatches from those soaked in dance floor sweat and roiling festival dust