

Inside Jeff White's World of Bluegrass

By David McCarty

Jeff White's world of bluegrass is a place where wayfaring strangers come face to face with death and destiny in a little cabin among the trees and cold-heart girlfriends jilt you without a second thought and then skip town with your car. Despite the often-tragic outcomes of the songs he writes and sings, Jeff bounds on-stage to perform with all the open-faced eagerness to please of a golden retriever pup. From his perfectly phrased flatpicking guitar intros and solos to his clear, soaring tenor voice, it's clear that here's a guy who wouldn't trade what he's doing for anything.

It's not just that boyish enthusiasm that sets Jeff White apart; he possesses the especially rare gift of being a brilliant songwriter and singer in addition to being one of today's great flatpickers. His career already includes such credits as playing and recording with Alison Krauss and Union Station, touring Japan with Texas mandolin great Dave Peters, recording with former Hot Rize banjo player Pete Wernick, and performing with Tim O'Brien both as a member of the O'Boys and with the newly formed Flatheads. When he's not playing bluegrass, Jeff holds one of the most prestigious touring gigs in all of country music as rhythm guitarist and backup singer to superstar Vince Gill, himself an excellent bluegrass player who selects only the very best players to perform and record with him.

More recently, Jeff exploded to even greater recognition with the release of his first solo CD, "The White Album," on Rounder Records. That album, filled with outstanding original tunes, superb musicianship and emotionally charged vocals, sat atop the bluegrass charts for several weeks, spawning several strong singles, and wound up on many lists as one of the top bluegrass albums of 1998.

As a followup, Jeff released his second solo CD, "The Broken Road" on Rounder earlier this year. Backed by Vince Gill on mandolin, Jerry Douglas on Dobro, Alison Krauss on vocals, and many other top players, Jeff's new CD features even more of his unique, powerhouse flatpicking guitar style.

Born in Syracuse, NY August 2, 1957, Jeff started playing music as a drummer in 4th grade, then switched to saxophone. "I played in my middle school jazz ensemble. We actually made some TV appearance," Jeff recalled. Just as he entered high school and began to get interested in playing guitar, the White family (no relation to Clarence and Roland) moved from New York to Indiana. Jeff met a couple of girls at his new church who showed him a few guitar chords and, as he puts it today, "That's where it all started."

Through high school, he pretty much stuck to strumming chords and playing popular music. But when he started college in 1975, Jeff discovered a student living in his dorm who was really into bluegrass. "He loaned me 'The Essential Doc Watson' and hearing Doc play Black Mountain Rag blew me away," Jeff said. Shortly after that, he heard Tony Rice's first album on Rounder, and from there started learning about players like Norman Blake and Dan Crary. "That got me involved in learning to flatpick," he explained, and he» also started playing with other bluegrass musicians.

Upon graduating college with a degree in sociology, Jeff headed to Bloomington, Indiana to begin graduate school. Long-known as a hotbed of musical activity, Bloomington's thriving acoustic music scene and its world-renowned School of Music already had attracted such future stars as Edgar Meyer, guitarist and vocalist Kathy Chiavola, and fiddler Lisa Germano, who went on to play and record with Indiana native John Mellencamp. Jeff quickly made a name for himself as a great flatpicker and singer and began performing bluegrass and David Grisman's "Dawg" music with a local band, Pink and the Naturals.

After a year and a half of graduate school, Jeff dropped out to become a musician full time. "My professor and I made a mutual decision that I'd pursue music," he said. The fact that his academic advisor had played jazz bass avidly, but then literally smashed his bass as a symbolic break from music when he earned his Ph.D. undoubtedly influenced Jeff's decision to leave behind the academic world for music.

Even before leaving school, Jeff had been performing on weekends at gigs around Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. One early connection had been with Alison Krauss, whom he met and jammed with at Indiana's legendary bluegrass festival at Bean Blossom when the budding bluegrass diva was just 13 years old. "She did 'I Know What It Means To Be Lonesome' and she really belted it out even back then," Jeff recalled.

Once Jeff was playing full time, he received a call asking if he'd audition for the guitar chair with Union Station. Impressed with his brilliant guitar work and soulful lead and harmony vocals, he got the job. "I was with her from about 1987 until about 1989; about two, two and a half years," he explained. "We did the 'Two Highways' album, and then 'I've Got That Old Feeling.'"

Following his tenure with AKUS, Jeff hooked up with mandolinist Butch Baldassari and bassist Mike Bub to replace Chris Jones in Weary Hearts. "We played some festivals and I made some connections with the guys from Hot Rize. That's when I started talking with Tim (O'Brien) about playing music with him at some point," Jeff noted. About that same time, Jeff met Dave Peters, the only person to win the prestigious mandolin championships at Winfield three times. Peters was putting together a band with fiddler Randy Howard and national banjo champion James McKinney to tour Japan for six months. "I was a little hesitant, but Dave said we'd make great money," Jeff said. "I thought if I go there and make a chunk of money, I could move to Nashville and be close to what's going on down there."

Returning from Japan in 1991, Jeff and his wife moved to Nashville as planned and began playing some gigs with Tim O'Brien. About that same time, though, he got a call from Vince Gill inviting him to join his touring band. "It was a really difficult decision for me to make because I like them both so much," he said. Jeff ended up deciding to go with Vince Gill and joined the group in 1992. "It's coming up on seven years now," Jeff recalled. "It's been really one of the best possible types of gigs. Vince has been a sideman and backup singer on hundreds of records, and he really values the musician part of it more than the showbiz part of it. He's always been very supportive of the people who are with him making their own records with other people and do their own things. He's never put a damper on that."

With a growing reputation both as one of the hottest flatpickers around and as one of bluegrass music's most intelligent, thoughtful songwriters, Flatpicking Guitar Magazine sat down with Jeff White to talk about his music.

FGM: How did "The White Album" come about?

Jeff: I'd been talking to Ken Irwin at Rounder for while, and Pete Wernick was very support of me. I said I want to make a record with these people, are you interested? I think they realized with all the people I have on the record, Alison Krauss, Vince Gill, Pete Wernick, Jerry Douglas, Mike Bub and Jeff Guernsey, it wasn't such a bad gamble.

FGM: How did the album go over?

Jeff: It did really well. It cracked the top ten on Americana Radio and did really well on bluegrass radio. "I Never Knew" was maybe the most popular song off that CD.

FGM: What impact did the release of a solo CD have on your career?

Jeff: Getting gigs as Jeff White had been difficult being in Vince's group, so the CD helped me go out and do the the kind of gigs I wanted to. I did Merlefest and the Ryman bluegrass series; those kind of higher profile gigs.

FGM: Bluegrassers tend to be parochial. Has your association with Vince Gill been a handicap in any way?

Jeff: I don't know whether people see me as a part-time bluegrass. I just figure that people realize that if I wanted to make country records, I'd have gone off and done that. Bluegrass is my home turf, but I also play country and feel blessed I can sing and play with the best country players in the business. It's taught me a lot about songwriting and singing and playing. Also, I greatly appreciate what Vince has done on my records. I don't think there's another country artist capable of jumping into a bluegrass band and singing great tenor and playing great mandolin. He brings excellent musicianship to my records.

FGM: Do you see a change in your musicianship as a bluegrass guitarist now?

Jeff: I guess I tend to look at it more song-oriented than instrumentally oriented. I've had some criticism from friends about not putting any instrumentals on my CDs. I understand that some people get miffed listening to me sing 14 songs; that would get on anyone's nerves! (laughs) I wanted to do a guitar instrumental on The Broken Road, but I ran out of room.

FGM: How about your growth as a flatpicker?

Jeff: When I was playing bluegrass full time, I probably technically could play faster and had more licks, and that side has diminished a little bit. Now I guess I look at (my playing) in terms of how it adds to the song. I'm trying to do something that complements the song.

FGM: What do you think makes your playing so unique compared to other contemporary flatpickers?

Jeff: I know I am not Bryan Sutton, although Bryan says what he likes about my playing is that I play loud and hard. What those guys do is totally unique to them. David Grier does what he does, and I don't want to make instrumental records like he does. So I'd say that where maybe I have diminished slightly in me picking wise, I've improved in my lead and harmony singing. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. (laughs)

FGM: Do you still have that sort of gunslinger mentality at all as a flatpicker?

Jeff: All I really want to do is make that first tier of guitar players. I'm the first to admit that I don't have any delusions that I'm the next Tony Rice or Clarence White. But I think when it comes to flatpicking and the picking side of bluegrass, people are immediately enthralled by how fast someone can play and all the jaw-dropping licks they can play. I enjoy that as much as any guy, but I don't want to do that all night long. So I don't have that contest mentality. There's room for all kinds of guitar players in bluegrass music.

FGM: How would you evaluate your evolution as a flatpicking guitar player?

Jeff: When we played at the Ryman, Sam Bush was playing mandolin and he gave me the nicest compliment. He said when I go to take a break, it's not like everyone else has to back off for me to be heard. I like to play hard and barrel on through. I guess when I was younger and playing in contests, the most prized thing was playing fast and clean and having an interesting arrangement. At Winfield, the guys I was most impressed with all had interesting arrangements. Then when I started to play in bands that were less instrumentally oriented like Alison Krauss, you still had material that allowed you to play fast, but you had to do something other than regurgitate licks. I think that's what mainly has helped me become stronger melodically. I'd rather hear something pretty melodic than hear mind-boggling licks.

FGM: Flatpickers seem to fall into one of two camps these days about instruments: either they fiddle constantly with different makes and models of guitar like Norman Blake does or they find one instrument that expresses their sound and stick with, like Tony Rice does. You've certainly been in that later group. What is it about the Mossman you like so well?

Jeff: I bought it new at a music store in Wabash, Indiana where I was teaching in 1977. It's a Great Plains model. I heard Crary's Mossman on his "Lady's Fancy" album and heard how clear it sounded, and I got one. I've always sought out guitars that had a lot of volume. I think the reason I like it so much is that I played in a band with a loud banjo player and I needed to cut through to be heard. I had been playing a D-18, but I just never got the volume I needed, especially when I was jamming. The Mossman seemed to cut through better. Also, you can hear each individual note. Each note rings distinctly, so there's not a low rumble on the bass strings. It's very effective over I mic. I don't have that low-end problem some other guitars have when miked. I just got another Mossman Great Plains from the same year, and on that one I had the saddle compensated on the E and B strings; otherwise it's pretty much standard.

FGM: You do always manage to punch out your solos. Does your guitar setup contribute to that?

Jeff: I use D'Addario medium gauge phosphor bronze strings, and I have my guitars setup with pretty high action, mainly because I play pretty hard and in order to not get too much buzzing, I need to set it up fairly high. For picks, I like a good, heavy pick, like a tortoiseshell or the purple Tortex picks. I have a Baggs pickup under the saddle.

FGM: How do you like to record your guitar?

Jeff: I pretty much leave the recording mics up to the engineers. They usually use two mics and position one below the sound hole and one either pointing at the fingerboard where it meets the soundboard or they'll put it at the lower bout where your arm comes over. The best engineers will take their time and even stick their head in front of the guitar and move it around to try to hear you and find the spot where the guitars sounds the best.

FGM: So what's next for Jeff White? Do you see yourself continuing to split your time between bluegrass and country?

Jeff: I'd like to be able to do as much of both as I can. I'm playing with the Flatheads in the Ryman bluegrass series, but that's just an occasional gig. I'm playing some with the McCoury's when Ronnie does his solo gigs. I had a huge thrill recently when the Del McCoury Band was supposed to do the Josh Graves benefit, but Del was sick, so I subbed for him. I was Del McCoury for the night! (laughs) I'm going to continue to write songs. And to be able to play with the guys in Vince's band and sing with Vince and Patty Loveless, and then be able to sit in and playing with bluegrass guys like David Grier and Bryan Sutton and Chris Thile, that's the best of two kinds of music. I just wish that the amount of preparation and knowledge you need to play bluegrass was adequately compensated. There's nothing fair about that.