

**A Conversation with Tim Stafford of Blue Highway
by Frank Goodman (4/2008, Puremusic.com)**

This is a long overdue interview with one of the great groups of modern Bluegrass music. Blue Highway has for all their nine records been considered at the top of the heap critically, and much admired by their musical peers and the community insiders. Their outreach is not yet what it should be into the musical world at large, but we've now joined the legions spreading the word.

Most or all of the members are outstanding instrumentalists in their own right, notably the 9-time IBMA Dobro Player of the Year Rob Ickes, whose playing is mind expanding. Although we've not yet had the pleasure of seeing Blue Highway live, we have seen Ickes roll with Three Ring Circle, another supergroup with Andy Leftwich and Dave Pomeroy, at Nashville's Station Inn. But in Blue Highway, he's just another guy in the band, because they're not only all monster pickers, they're all writers of repute. Blue Highway is Shawn Lane on mandolin and vocals, Jason Burleson on banjo, guitar, mandolin, and vocals, Wayne Taylor on bass and vocals, Tim Stafford on guitar and vocals, and Rob Ickes on dobro, slide guitar, and vocals.

On top of being admired by all their contemporaries, even the younger impresarios like The Infamous Stringdusters (whose upcoming record will surely constitute an interview opportunity) look up to Blue Highway in a public way and acknowledge their influence. Their vocals are remarkable, and perhaps their most arresting quality. Their sound is one born of many years together. The latest release is *Through the Window of a Train*, on Rounder. They cut this record right off the floor with little or no pre-production or arrangement, and it's fresh.

We were lucky to get up with guitarist extraordinaire Tim Stafford, who gave us a look inside this fascinating band and the bluegrass life. Be sure to sample the clips before or after this conversation, and if you haven't already, begin your collection of Blue Highway records. It's inevitable.

Puremusic: I see you guys played Joe's Pub in New York City last night.

Tim Stafford: We did, yeah.

PM: That's a favorite music room of mine.

TS: We had never played there before. It went over great. It's a really neat little place.

PM: It's a beautiful room, isn't it? It's got a good sound and a good crowd.

TS: Yeah. Some of the best sound we've ever, ever played. It's a great crowd.

PM: I bet that great bluegrass is kind of popular in that zip code. How did the show go?

TS: Oh, it went wonderful. We got a couple standing O's, so....

PM: Wow.

TS: It was great. And we sold good.

PM: Nice.

TS: Yeah.

PM: Did you have any time to trip around or eat out in the city while you were there, or were you just hanging out?

TS: Well, we were there for a couple days, but we didn't stay in the city. We stayed over in Newark. But we were around on Tuesday doing *Relix*, did a conference play there. And then we did one at Sirius Radio in between going over to Joe's. So we got a chance to go eat some really good Indian food.

PM: Ah, that's nice. There's so much good Indian food down in the East Village.

TS: That's where we were.

PM: Yep.

TS: So we went down on 6th and ate at the Taj Mahal down there. It was really, really good.

PM: So yeah, congratulations on your great latest and self-produced disc, *Through the Window of a Train*.

TS: Well, thanks man. I appreciate that. It was the easiest record we ever made, by far.

PM: Wow. Still climbing mountains, to coin another title of yours.

TS: [laughs] Yeah. Well, we're still trying. We're still there.

PM: So how was it easier, this one, than some you've done before?

TS: Well, it's our eighth record, and the very first one we haven't done in Nashville. Most of us don't live close to there. The only one who does is Rob. And we thought we'll just save a little money, and we'll trust--because technology has changed so much that it's easier to do better sounding recordings all the time.

PM: Absolutely. People are doing them on laptops all over the world. [laughs]

TS: Truly. And we found a great little room called Maggard Studio up in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. It's where Ralph Stanley does all his records.

PM: So the room is already bluegrass seasoned.

TS: Absolutely. Yeah, Keith Whitley recorded in there.

PM: It's unbelievable. There are so many good songs on this record, I don't know where to start. So let's talk about the title song, which I found very moving indeed, even more profoundly for me than obviously moving songs like "Homeless Man" or "Two Soldiers"--something about "Through the Window of Train" just really killed me, in a good way.

TS: Well, great, man. I really appreciate that. I like that song, too. As soon as we finished it, the idea was to have the imagery kind of do the talking, because obviously you know what the song is about once you get into it, that it's about this fellow who's an old man now, and remembering when he was kid riding on the train. But the images of what he saw, that's what stuck out in my mind, what it would have been like to sit in that train and see the world go by.

PM: Yeah, it's just so simply and poetically wrapped up there when you say, "I saw it all once upon a time through the window of a train." It's just really good.

TS: I appreciate that.

PM: Maybe you remember how that tune got written with Steve Gulley, tell us something about him.

TS: Okay. Well, Steve is a great singer and songwriter. He used to play with Doyle Lawson years ago, and then with Mountain Heart, he was the original lead singer.

PM: I see.

TS: He's in a group called Grasstowne now. But he lives about two and a half hours away from me. And we just get together and write every chance we get. And I think we've written close to probably 30 songs over the last few years.

PM: Wow.

TS: And that one there was just an idea that I had on paper. We just decided to flesh it out, like we always do. I was really pleased with the way that one turned out. I wasn't sure how he was going to cut it. We didn't know who to pitch it to, first. But I'm glad they wanted to do it.

PM: So everybody just brings the tunes they got lately to the table, and then just things get hashed through, and you pick some tunes.

TS: That's exactly how it goes. We just sit around a table, either with our guitars or with a boombox.

PM: With a boombox, that's fantastic. [laughs] I can imagine, "Oh, here's something I wrote with Steve. Check it out." And throw your hat in the ring, there.

TS: That's exactly what it is.

PM: Unbelievable. And I guess you try and work it out so that if it's going to be a very original record, like this one was, that everybody gets a couple of tunes on, and I'm sure there's a democracy there, too.

TS: It's always a democracy. But the thing about us is we don't set out to make all original records. We did with *Still Climbing a Mountain*, because we had been writing a lot. And Jerry Douglas produced that record.

PM: Right.

TS: I thought it would be a great concept to have, so that was done beforehand. But this one here, we just threw out the best songs that we had. And there were some that weren't original. I think Rob had a Bob Dylan song, we almost did that one.

PM: Really? Which one?

TS: "Gotta Serve Somebody."

PM: Oh, wow, that would have been an interesting cover.

TS: And somebody covered it right after that. It just was on a record.

PM: Covered it bluegrass?

TS: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Isn't that strange. I would never have heard that off the bat as a bluegrass cut.

TS: Yeah, I couldn't believe it. But we just decided we had 12 strong original songs, and that's kind of the identity of the group anymore, so we'll just go with that. It doesn't always work like that. *Marbletown*, there were two really strong songs that weren't original.

PM: There was the Knopfler cut, right?

TS: Right. The Knopfler cut, and then "Lazarus."

PM: Right. Yeah, you don't hear enough good Gary Scruggs tunes these days; he's just a really great writer.

TS: He is, man. He's one of those guys that I really want to write with more, and we haven't had a chance to do it.

PM: Aside from being great songwriters and singers, the pickin' power of Blue Highway is just so undeniable. Even Ickes' outstanding dobro style doesn't shine any brighter than anybody else's playing, which is saying a lot. But don't you think that there's something extremely compelling about a flat-picked guitar? It just really fires audiences up, don't you think?

TS: Yeah. Once upon a time it was novelty to have a flat-pick lead. I remember that, too. I remember it was like, okay well, we're expecting a banjo break and a mandolin break, or whatever. But when the guitar would take a break it was more like a bass novelty or something.

PM: [laughs]

TS: We'll do a bass break. But now it's more expected.

PM: Because a lot of bluegrass bands don't have a good flat-pick guitar player.

TS: Yeah, there's more of them than there used to be, but it's still not as prevalent as the other instruments. I only like to do it if a song kind of calls for it. I don't say, "Yeah, I have to have a guitar right here." I don't like doing that.

PM: Because I remember in the '60s and '70s--years ago--it was just Doc Watson and a few other people that were picking the hell out of the flatop guitar, and it was just, as you say, it was truly unusual, and people went crazy.

TS: Yeah, yeah. I didn't see all that, because I didn't start playing guitar until about '77. But by the time that I was aware of it, Norman Blake and Clarence White [now sadly deceased, one of the seminal Country Rock geniuses, of The Byrds] had already been around for a long time.

PM: Right.

TS: Dan Crary, too, as well Doc.

PM: Absolutely. And just logistically--or I don't know how you would say it, circumstantially, the greatest of Clarence's flat-pick guitar really never saw the light of day except in bluegrass circles. Like Doc Watson got out there all over the place.

TS: Yeah, man.

PM: But so much of that great Clarence stuff is little known.

TS: Clarence is one of my all-time favorite players.

PM: Oh, yeah!

TS: The thing with Clarence was the timing. He would play with the timing and do these syncopated things that nobody had ever done. With Doc it was more like he was trying to make it sound like a fiddle.

PM: Right.

TS: Clarence had his own take on it that opened up a whole world there. And of course, Tony Rice had his own take on Clarence, too. So it keeps going in circles like that.

PM: Absolutely. Conversely speaking, I never think that banjo players get the juice from the crowd that they ought to. It's got something to do, it seems, with the right hand, how the notes are rolled through, rather than fired off a plectrum, or ripped off a bow. Does that make any sense to you?

TS: It could be. I don't know. Our banjo player [Jason Burleson] is not real flashy. He plays straight ahead stuff, but it's got great timing and great tone.

PM: Yeah, and his choice of notes is really great, nice and bluesy.

TS: Right. His favorite players are kind of my favorite players, too, people like J. D. Crow and Ron Block and Terry Baucom.

PM: Right. Now, I don't know that last name. Who does he play with?

TS: Well, Terry Baucom, he played with Boone Creek years ago, and then he also played with Doyle. He was the original banjo player in Doyle Lawson's band. Great driving banjo player.

PM: Yeah, because I like that Jay Burleson. I like the way he plays the banjo. That sounds really good to me.

TS: Yes. He's very versatile, too. He's started playing mandolin more. He's a great guitar player, too. So we try to switch--we switched it up more on this record than any we've ever done.

PM: Right. There was a lot of multi-instrumentaling going on.

TS: Yeah. And I think that's just something we haven't done as much as we need to.

PM: Do you do that on stage, too, sometimes?

TS: We are. It's becoming a challenge because [laughs] with that much switching off, we've got to figure out ways to take up the time, and make our set list so it's not such a real challenge and we don't have a lot of dead space.

PM: So it's not a switch every song, right. You got to get a string of tunes where everybody's on the same thing for a couple three tunes, and then you do a little switching. Yeah, because somebody has got to get up to the mic and say something.

TS: Right. You can't do too many slow songs in a row, not too many keys the same.

PM: People don't realize what goes into making a list.

TS: Yeah. It's true, man. It's like sequencing a record, to me that's very important. And not a lot of people know that I actually spend a lot of time doing that.

PM: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, we always do audio clips of anybody we interview or review, and when I go to do audio clips, I never take my favorites off the record, it's just like, no, I take the first three tunes. And people say, "Why do you just take the first three?" I say, "Do you have any idea how many hours went into the sequencing of that record? You don't have to rethink it, they thought about it."

TS: Absolutely. That's something a lot of people don't think about. But to me it's crucial, because that's the way you're going to hear it. That sequence is forever going to be associated with the way you hear it. Most people don't even think of it.

PM: And some people will make light of it, saying, "Well, that album is front-loaded." Hey, *life* is front-loaded.

[laughter]

PM: It's like when you meet a woman, you give her all your best stuff in the opening three days, don't you?

TS: You better. Yeah.

PM: A couple of your super tunes on *Through the Window of a Train* were co-written with Bobby Starnes, "A Week From Today," "My Roping Days Are Done," and "Blues on Blues." Maybe tell us something about him, and what your process with him is like. I don't know him.

TS: Bobby is a local guy here in East Tennessee. He and I went to high school together.

PM: Wow.

TS: He's a couple years younger than me. The thing about Bobby, he's a great musician too. He played rock 'n' roll and country music on the road for a number of years before he settled down. He owns his own pre-press company now. They illustrate most of the college textbooks that are printed.

PM: Wow.

TS: And as a matter of fact, he and I and his business partner are going into business together. I think we're going to be starting our own press. And our first book is going to be this Tony Rice book I've been working on.

PM: No kidding. Let's hear about that.

TS: I've been working on it for like seven years. I've got a co-writer now, Caroline Wright from Hawaii.

PM: How did you find her?

TS: Well, she had written an article on Tony for *Listener* magazine back when it was functioning, that was just great. So Pam, Tony's wife, was really impressed with it, and she suggested that we work on the book together. And we've been doing that for the last four years or so. I think we're finally going to get it out this year. It's been a long process. And this new press, it's going to be music biographies. That's what we're going to focus on.

PM: Wow. That's really exciting, Tim. That's really something. And it's a hell of a subject to start with. Tony must be a really fascinating character.

TS: Oh, man, we couldn't have picked anybody any more fascinating. And he's a mystery, too, he's an enigma.

PM: Right. I mean, yeah, you don't really hear much about him, and yet when you see him on stage and you hear him talk, wow, that's a deep character there.

TS: It is. And he's one of those guys, too, that legends spring up about. At one time he was just as close as you could get to bluegrass royalty. And I do think that his guitar style is probably the second most copied instrumental style in bluegrass music. The first would be Scruggs' banjo.

PM: Right.

TS: So him being that influential, and hearing Alison Krauss go on and on about him... He was a hero to a lot of people that I didn't even realize--like Roy Orbison was a huge Tony Rice fan.

PM: Wow!

TS: And Eddie Van Halen, evidently, is a real big Tony Rice fan.

PM: [laughs] That's very entertaining.

TS: Yeah. So something like that, that's the sort of thing we want to bring out in the book. Plus there's just a ton of great anecdotes.

PM: And there must be thousands, or at least hundreds of hours of interviews with the man.

TS: Oh, my gosh, man. That's been the biggest part of it. Because our format is pretty much a first-person narrative, an edited narrative. So Tony is going to be telling his story in his own words.

PM: No kidding. That's a wonderful stylistic approach.

TS: I like the way it worked out. And we've done 80-some other interviews. And we still have a few more to do. But the plan is for this book to come out at the IBMA in September. So we'll see. We're moving up against some really stiff deadlines at this point.

PM: Right. And so you'll have your own booth as a publishing company, and do the whole thing like that.

TS: Right, right. So Bobby will be involved in that. And Bobby, he's probably my best friend. I mean, we hang out. Even when I'm on the road I go over to his house and we'll write songs and just hang out. I think we're going to Hiltonhead on Sunday to his condo down there and just hang out for a few days. We'll probably end up writing that whole time.

PM: Well, when that book on Tony comes out, I'd love to review it in the ezine, and maybe do an interview with yourself again at that time or--what was your co-writer's name, Caroline Wright?

TS: Wright, yeah. I'll tell you what, just go ahead and drop me an email and I'll put you on the list for that, to make sure you get a copy, and then we'll do an interview. Yeah, Tony said he's going to do a lot of press releases, too, he's committed to it.

PM: Wow. I saw Tony play a Merlefest or two ago, and he had this young cat from the West Coast playing guitar with him. I didn't catch his name, but he was really good. Do you know the guy I mean? I mean, he was young. He had to be like teens or very early 20s.

TS: Well, it might have been Chris Eldridge.

PM: That's the guy. Chris Eldridge.

TS: Yeah, that's Ben Eldridge's boy, from the Seldom Scene.

PM: Oh!

TS: Yeah, they call him Critter.

[laughter]

TS: I mean, ever since he was a little kid, he was hanging around everyone and they'd call him Critter.

PM: Boy, he sure could play.

TS: Oh, man, yeah. He played with this group, The Infamous String Dusters.

PM: Oh! He was in the Dusters.

TS: But he plays with Chris Thile now.

PM: Wow.

TS: He's in his group. Yeah, he's great, man. He's going to probably rewrite the book on bluegrass guitar at some point.

PM: Damn! Now he's playing with Chris Thile. Well, yeah, that's a good way to start rewriting the book right there.

TS: [laughs] That'll do it.

PM: I sure love that song that you wrote with Wood Newton, "Two Soldiers."

TS: Oh, thanks. We've been getting so much response to that song. Wood is just a great guy, and a wonderful writer. I think he's one of my favorite writers.

PM: I have run into him a couple of times around town. He's a hell of a guy. And I'm sure some of our readers will recognize him as a co-writer of hit single "Riding With Private Malone." That cat is a hell of a songwriter, right?

TS: Oh, yeah. I did a songwriting camp. He came out and played, did a round with me and a couple other people at Nashcamp Songwriting Camp a couple years ago. And I heard him do "Private Malone." I was just, "Oh, I got to write with this guy." And we did, and "Two Soldiers" was the first one we wrote.

PM: Whose idea was that? I mean, I didn't really know about that detail. I've seen it in the movies, but yeah, I never thought about it like that.

TS: Yeah, I only knew about it peripherally. But it was my idea because I had seen a thing on CNN that was a story of a soldier in Iraq who had sent a letter home telling his family not to worry, and told his wife, "If you see two soldiers at your door you'll know I'm in heaven."

PM: Oh, yikes.

TS: So that phrase, "two soldiers" really stuck out.

PM: Imagine doing that detail. Well, I'm sure you did, you wrote the song.

TS: Yeah, that's what inspired it, man, was we just started thinking, *God, what a job*. Of all the jobs you could have... But it's a duty, like it says in the song. And I know those guys feel like they're providing a really valuable service. They are.

PM: Right. And the way they do it is very valuable, right, like the song says. So have you and Wood gone on to write many other songs?

TS: I think we've written three or four. We still get together, I just haven't had time here with this book here, lately. But he's on my short list of co-writers. I've only got a few people I write a lot with--Steve, Bobby, Wood. I also write quite a bit with Kim Williams and Larry Shell. I really like writing with them.

PM: We certainly think that Blue Highway is not only one of the best bluegrass bands on the road, but one of the best that's ever been on the road. Lord knows I'm a big Jim Lauderdale fan, but it's high time you guys won a Grammy. You know what I mean?

TS: [laughs] Oh, man. Well, we really appreciate that. That's very, very nice. We're just thrilled to be able to still do it after 14 years, man. Somebody said that our band is old enough to get married in West Virginia.

[laughter]

PM: Now, does that kind of recognition, a Grammy and all, does that mean much in the bluegrass world, is it more of a kudos from like the IBMA or the SPBGMA?

TS: I think that any award is just gravy for most people--as far as I know. I know that the IBMA Awards mean a lot to people because it's the people within the industry that vote on it. But there's nothing like a Grammy, too, even though we know that it's more of a popularity contest.

PM: Yeah. It only is what it is.

TS: Right.

PM: But yeah, it's pretty cool, I guess.

TS: It's still a Grammy. We were thrilled the last two times we got nominated for a Grammy. But we definitely don't make them for the awards. I mean, that never crosses our mind when we're making them. Got to just do it to be doing it. Make the best one you can.

PM: One of many bluegrass greats that have covered your songs is Ronnie Bowman, who's had success also as a songwriter in country. Do you write much in that genre and pitch songs to mainstream country?

TS: I'd like to do more of that, but I haven't gone that route yet. I've worked with Ronnie, and through Ronnie I've worked some with Buddy Cannon, and he's helped get me on a few things. I played on Willie Nelson's last record.

PM: That had to be fun.

TS: Yeah. I haven't had any country holds or anything like that. Shawn [Lane] actually has. He and Ronnie wrote a song that's been cut by Brad Paisley.

PM: Wow.

TS: I don't know if it's going to get released or not, but that would be great. Yeah, Ronnie and I have written a bunch of stuff together. He's having a lot of success, but he still likes to get with his buds and run.

PM: Boy, he's a singer who just--I mean, you just can't say enough about him.

TS: Absolutely. One of my absolute favorite singers. I'm glad to count him as a bud.

PM: Just one of those guys. Would you say something about your solo disc, *Endless Line*?

TS: Yeah. Well, that was just a thing I always wanted to do. And back in 2004, I guess it was, Dan Miller had come to me about if I'd ever thought about it. And I had for a long time, but I never really put it in motion. So I said, "Well, okay, I want to do it." And then I worked on it a little bit. We'd actually recorded one song already. Rushad Eggleston and I did this tune called "Obsession."

PM: That guy is unbelievable! [laughs]

TS: He's amazing, man. And that was before Crooked Still.

PM: So how did you know Rushad?

TS: Yeah, well a lot more people know who he is now. But the first time I heard him I couldn't believe that this cat could play like that.

PM: And that's an insane group, I mean Crooked Still, holy jeez.

TS: Oh, yeah. I love their stuff. I don't think he's with them anymore, but he still--

PM: Oh, really? Did he move on?

TS: He moved on. But they've got another cello player who's kind of a similar cat.

PM: Another outside dude, yeah.

TS: Yeah. But I just wanted to showcase and get a rhythm section that really wasn't Blue Highway, so I wasn't making another Blue Highway record.

PM: Right.

TS: So I got Adam Steffey. And I figured once I got Adam, I thought, well--at that time he was playing in Mountain Heart. I was like, yeah, I'll just get Steve Gulley and I'll get Jason Moore from that group, so I know that there's a good chance I could get all three of those guys at the same time.

PM: Right.

TS: Then I got Ron Stewart to play banjo. And he's so great.

PM: Oh, yeah.

TS: I just love playing with Ron. Yeah, it was fun, man. I'm going to do another one, but it's not going to be like this one. I think the next one is going to be more of like solo guitar stuff, because I've got a lot of original guitar things I'd like to maybe put out on a record.

PM: That's great. And there's a market for that. I mean, there's a lot of guitar freaks that like nothing better than to hear a great six-stringer rip it up.

TS: Well, I've never done just that, so this would be just an instrumental record.

PM: Would you say that bluegrass is bigger than ever? Doesn't it seem like there are more performers and groups than ever?

TS: It does. But it's a trend in music, anyway, right now. With all the problem we're having with downloading and file sharing and all that, part of the problem is, too, that we've got so many bands right now. It's amazing. You know how many releases we have all the time.

PM: Oh, it's obscene, really.

TS: You can't do it, there's so much competition for people's ears, too, and for their time, with video games, DVDs, big screen HDTV--god, you name it. But I do think that bluegrass--ever since the *O Brother* thing, it seems like we've had a little bit more respectability.

PM: And when you look back, how can it be that such a funny silly little movie kicked that thing off?

TS: That's a really good point.

PM: I mean, it was just a movie.

TS: I Know.

PM: But that's where it began.

TS: It's always been some kind of media event. It was either the *Beverly Hillbillies* or--

PM: Right, of course.

TS: --or "Dueling Banjos" or--

PM: Oh, wow, I never thought of it like that, Tim. It was *The Hillbillies* and "Dueling Banjos" that kicked bluegrass down the road at those times.

TS: Right. Or *Bonnie and Clyde*. Every time something like that would come along there would be talk that, "Hey, this is when bluegrass is going to get a shot."

PM: Right. "I'm going to go get a banjo."

TS: Yeah. And think about all the people that those things inspired. Bela Fleck got inspired to play by hearing "Dueling Banjos."

PM: Really? [laughs]

TS: Yeah, that was where he got started. I know the first time I heard the banjo was on *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I used to watch it all the time.

PM: Yeah, I still think about Miss Hathaway and the cement pond and all that stuff.

[laughter]

PM: It's in our DNA, I mean...

TS: Our cultural DNA. That swimming pool sure can get shallow.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that's funny.

It also struck me--do you think the younger set is catching on nationally to bluegrass at the festival circuit, for instance?

TS: Yeah. I think the jamgrass phenomenon fueled by the residue of The Dead movement--

PM: Right, the acoustic side of The Dead.

TS: --and the Phish phenomenon, and the whole jamgrass thing... We just played for *Relix*. We did a conference for them up in New York. So there's a magazine that deals with that now that's very popular.

PM: The *Relix* people are starting a country magazine.

TS: Yeah, that's what I've heard. If you go to Colorado and places like that, you see all of these young kids playing, as well as the young fans.

PM: Right, hippie-grass.

TS: Absolutely. It's so big out there. It's just huge. That's a new thing. I don't think we had that kind of thing 10 years ago, not like it is right now.

PM: Well, even with all the competition that there is out there for the stage and people's concert dollar, I hope it's translating to a reasonably solid living for great bluegrass guys.

TS: It's actually going pretty well. I don't know, I can't speak for everybody else in the music. But this last year was our best year ever, financially and otherwise. We don't play that many shows, either. We only do like 70 shows a year usually at the most.

PM: That's a beautiful number. That's like an ideal number.

TS: Well, it works out good for us because three of the guys have kids that are under eight years old.

PM: Wow.

TS: I understand what that's like. Mine is 16 now. But I remember when he was that age, that's when the band started. Well, when our band started he was two. And I remember not wanting to be gone that much back in those days.

PM: Yeah. The last question I have is just something that was rolling around in my head. I don't know if it plays or not. It seemed to me that as perhaps the two essentially American musical forms, there are parallels between jazz and bluegrass that can be drawn, don't you think?

TS: I think so. And I know that a lot of players, for whatever reason, whether it's Tony Rice or David Grisman, whatever, in bluegrass, have really learned to appreciate that. Our band is a good example. We got a couple of guys that are just kind of ate up with it. Shawn is really interested in it, too, and I've always loved jazz, but Rob and Jason can play it pretty fluently.

PM: Really?

TS: Yeah, yeah. They're really good at it.

PM: And it's curious that the level of musicianship involved in those two forms is so high that to some degree it qualifies, if not limits, both the participants and the aficionados.

TS: I think so. It's sort of the hazard of that kind of music on one level. But bluegrass has got a lot of other things going for it, too. It can be real participator friendly, too. You don't have to have a tremendous amount of knowledge to start playing bluegrass. Whereas in jazz you probably have to have a pretty--

PM: You can't even get started without a bunch of chops, right.

TS: Yeah, man, you got to have a lot of chops in order to really get into it.

PM: And you've got to have theory. I mean, you don't got to have theory to play good bluegrass, you just got to go get yourself some chops.

TS: You have to have a good ear.

PM: Yeah.

TS: That's maybe the difference, I guess. I mean, everybody who knows music knows that the jazz cats have really got the chops. That's what we kind of aspire to--not to play jazz but to play with that kind of proficiency.

PM: But yeah, that's the thing that bluegrass really has going for it, when you compare it with jazz, it's got that down-home quality that jazz doesn't even pretend to--

TS: Yeah, that's true.

PM: --because it comes from the hills.

TS: There are some definite parallels, but there are also some big differences, there's no doubt about that. But there are probably not two more uniquely American kinds of music, I don't think.

PM: Yeah, those are a couple of things we still do best.

TS: Absolutely.

PM: Well, Tim, it's really, really nice to meet you. I really enjoyed the new record. And I'm really grateful for your time tonight.

TS: Yeah, Frank, I enjoyed this. You're very knowledgeable. You're like the absolute polar opposite of this interview we did in New York with Joey Reynolds the other night.

PM: Really?

TS: Joey, man--I mean, he's in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, and he had no idea who the hell we were.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that's terrible.

TS: And not just us, but I mean, he didn't know anything about bluegrass. He said, "So you play a form of country music."

TS: I said, "Yeah, we play bluegrass." And said, "Oh, my least favorite kind of country music."

PM: Oh, my God!

TS: And we were like, "Uhhhh, okay."

PM: "Well, should we apologize, or just leave, or what?" [laughs]

TS: The thing was--I don't know, it just sort of ended up being funny after a while, because he wouldn't even ask us questions, and when he did, he would just answer them himself.

PM: [laughs]

TS: He just rattled on from one subject to the other.

PM: What a nightmare!

TS: It was. It really was. [laughs]

PM: Well, I'm glad I could provide a little relief from that experience.

TS: Oh, man, 100% the other direction, yeah. I appreciate it.

PM: Well, thanks again for your time, Tim. And I look forward to meeting you sometime around town, and seeing you guys play.

TS: Oh, thanks so much, Frank. You take care.