

A Conversation with Drew Emmitt
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 5/2002)

In the early nineties, Vince Herman's Salmon Heads and Drew Emmitt's Left Hand String Band merged to become one of the most popular bands on either the Bluegrass or the Jam Band circuit, Leftover Salmon.

They belong to both scenes and are mainstays in festival world on a national level. LoS are among the cream of the crop of renegade bluegrass virtuosos of the generation after Newgrass Revival. They call their music Polytechnic Cajun Slamgrass, that oughta give you an idea what they're about. They take their chops seriously, but that's about it.

Their legendary banjo player Mark Vann passed away this year after a battle with melanoma, but the band eventually resumed its busy touring schedule, and will be hitting the festival circuit hard all spring and summer. Led by multi-instrumentalist and excellent tenor Drew Emmitt on mandolin, fiddle, and electric guitar, and the lyrically improvisational lead singing of Vince Herman. They are equally fueled by the seasoned vocals and keyboard work of Bill McKay, and the nonpareil rhythm section of Greg Garrison on bass and Jose Martinez on drums.

Their fifth and live album is soon due to be released by Compass Records, the group's first release with this label. Compass is already experiencing success with the recent release of Drew Emmitt's first solo record, *Freedom Ride*. On this record, Drew is backed up by the formidable John Cowan Band and a handful of famous friends. We spoke with Drew about his maiden solo voyage on the phone recently, he was at his Colorado mountain home getting ready to leave on tour. During or after the interview, please be sure to check out some *Freedom Ride* clips on our Listen page, and watch for Drew Emmitt or Leftover Salmon this summer.

Puremusic: Hey Drew, thanks for taking my call. How you doin'?

Drew Emmitt: I'm doing good, Frank. Thought I might have missed you, I had to take a couple of calls back there.

PM: No problem, I wasn't about to lose you. We want to do interviews with yourself, John Cowan, and Michelle Shocked this issue.

DE: That's cool, we've played with Michelle before.

PM: I confess that I am not a long running fan of Leftover Salmon, though I'd heard of the band for years. I'm becoming more familiar now, and got on to your new solo effort, *Freedom Ride*, through my friend Shari at Compass Records. That's a great record.

DE: Why, thank you, good to hear that.

PM: How did the idea of doing a record with The John Cowan Band backing you up arise?

DE: Let's see. It actually started last Spring. John and I have been becoming closer friends over the last few years, and he sat in with us at Telluride. On a few occasions, we've brought John and Sam [Bush] together to play with us, and that's been really great. We'd become friends with John and Sam individually, and because of that we've been able to facilitate that kind of thing, and we've had some great times. Other than that, last spring we started talking about my doing a tour with John, because he'd been out with Salmon. Two years ago, he came out and played bass with us on an acoustic tour. He proposed that I come out and play with his band. So we'd planned this tour for the fall, and his agent, Barron Ruth, came up with the idea. He said, "Wouldn't it be great if you did a record with John?" Because the tour had gone so well, and we were having such a good time. So he started poking around with a few record labels.

PM: John did, or Barron did?

DE: Barron did. He got a few labels interested, and Compass became the most interesting label to me. I just thought they were great from the word go.

PM: They certainly do some very cool things.

DE: They're very musician-oriented, of course, because of Alison. [Alison Brown, the co-owner of the label, is a Grammy winning banjo player.] They were really excited about the idea. Next thing you know, the studio time was set, and I'm calling up Vassar Clements, Peter Rowan, Ronnie McCoury, and Sam Bush, to see what could come together. Everybody said "Sure."

PM: So, when you're pulling in guys of that caliber to play on your solo project, how does it go? Do they put a high tag on their participation, or do it on the buddy level, or what?

DE: It's a little of both, you know. Number one, because we're friends and have played music together, they want to do the project. Obviously, these guys could pick and choose their projects. And Sam barely got there, because he was supposed to go out to CA to do the David Grisman project. [David will be our July cover.] And the week before, he was recording with Jorma Kaukonen.

PM: Oh yeah, we did an interview with Jorma here during that week. He was really jazzed about doing that record with those guys.

DE: Oh, cool. That's a unique bunch of guys, they're very personable and humble for being such great musicians. It's not an attitude thing with them.

PM: Yeah, it's usually the guys in the middle that have bad attitudes, not the ones at the top, isn't it?

DE: I think you're right, there. Sam called the other day from his car in Nashville to say, "You're on the radio!" and put the phone up to his car speaker. And he was all excited, with all the many records he's played on. He was surprised that he sounded "pretty good" since he thought he wasn't playing that great in the studio or something...

PM: Guys that good don't have bad days. When they do, it doesn't even sound like a bad day. They couldn't do it if they tried, you know.

DE: Right, but that's just the kind of humility those guys really do have. It's wonderful.

PM: Are the Salmon records self-produced, or on a label?

DE: The first two are self-produced. *Bridges to Bert* and *Ask the Fish* we put out ourselves. Then we were courted by a number of labels, seven or eight of them. We went with Hollywood Records. The next two, *Euphoria* and *The Nashville Sessions*, were on Hollywood. Then they decided that we weren't going to be the next one hit wonder, and that was that.

PM: Who are they, Hollywood? I don't know anything about them.

DE: They're owned by Disney. It's interesting what happened to Hollywood. When we signed with them, they had a really great staff, and we had a really good feeling about them. Right when our first record came out with them, almost everybody at the label got fired or left. They completely changed personnel, and our connection disappeared, got lost. They sure didn't know what to do with us. We did okay, but it could have been so much better. Especially with *The Nashville Sessions*, we were hoping for a whole lot more.

PM: That record had such a beautiful angle, so promotable under the circumstances. Bluegrass band turned major jam band goes to Music City to record with the heavies, come on.

DE: We thought so, too. But that's just the way the record business is. People don't stay around long. That's another thing I really like about Compass, it's a really solid staff that seem happy doing what they're doing, and the team stays together.

PM: It's a more familial feel over there. In light of that Hollywood shakeup, did *The Nashville Sessions* or *Euphoria* get much airplay?

DE: Yeah, some. They each had a couple of tunes that got some play.

PM: But I'll bet your airplay on *Freedom Ride* already exceeds what those albums received, is that right?

DE: Absolutely.

PM: There's nothing like a little record company working hard, when you're talking about Americana radio, at least.

DE: To me, they're already doing way more with their small staff than we saw out of Hollywood.

PM: And it's so much about matching your record to what it is they do. You're right up their alley, they can really sell you.

DE: And now, because of this solo record, they've also signed Leftover Salmon. They're going to put out our new live record. That's a really cool development.

PM: Right. It sounds like Leftover Salmon is a very democratic setup, is that correct? So the band is really behind the Compass move.

DE: Yes, on both counts. At first, we'd thought we would put it out on our own, but after my dealings with Compass, I brought the idea to the band to rethink our plan. They would do so much more with our record than we could ever dream of, you know.

PM: And they've already greased the slide with your release, might as well enjoy the ride, kind of thing. Feels more like a campaign.

DE: Exactly, it helps both records.

PM: So, it was Barron Ruth that brought the deal with Compass about, then?

DE: Definitely. He had [co-owner] Gary West call me. Without a manager to do the deal, we just talked informally into an arrangement. We didn't even sign a contract until the record was almost finished. That would obviously never have happened with a major label.

PM: Right. First the shackles, then the shekels. I see that the title cut is from The Hooters gang. [For those who are unfamiliar, a popular band from Philly in the 80s and 90s that featured super songwriters Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian, who wrote a number of hits for other people, including "Time After Time" for Cyndi Lauper, "What if God was One of Us" for Joan Osborne, and many others.]

DE: That's a record that John dug up, and we were doing it on the tour together last fall.

PM: What record is that from?

DE: I don't know, exactly. It's not a Hooters song per se, but written by their writers. [We think it's from a great side project called *Largo*.] John's a master of digging out great songs from a wide range of places, and making them his own. What surprised me was when he said, "You wanna put 'Freedom Ride' on the record?" [when he could have

“kept” it for his next CD instead]. So, yeah, I was happy to include that, we already liked the song a lot. And later it became the title of the record. That was a gift.

PM: Yeah, those guys are some of my favorite songwriters, for sure. I love that instrumental, “Paving Eisenhower.” Jeff Autry is really tearing it up on that one, along with the rest of you. I appreciate when people put the blue in Bluegrass, it really funks it up.

DE: Thanks, I like that, too.

PM: *Freedom Ride* is a very joyous record, you know? It has a great positive vibe of fraternity. There’s a generosity of spirit there that moved me. I figure that’s gotta be your personality, that’s who Drew Emmitt is, right?

DE: I like to lean toward the positive, I’m definitely an optimist. Any blues that goes into the tunes has an up side. I don’t much venture into the darker areas, musically or personally. I go the other way, try and lift myself and people up.

PM: Sure, Lord knows there are plenty of songwriters and musicians handling the dark side of life.

DE: Indeed.

PM: It’s amazing, isn’t it, what’s happening to Bluegrass? I mean the sudden spike of interest due to *O Brother*. It was as unpredictable as, say, blues suddenly hitting the top of the charts or something.

DE: No kidding, it’s been real interesting.

PM: I think it’s great that Tim O’Brien is the new President of the IBMA. [International Bluegrass Music Association] He’s just the guy to pull it all together and get the most out of the situation. If bluegrass plays its cards right, it could stand to capture a lot of the floundering country market.

DE: I think that people really want to get back to roots music, and something that’s real and has depth. Country has become so formulaic and polished, so Top 40. The young people that are coming out to see us don’t want anything to do with that. People don’t want music that’s being dished out like fast food, you know? They want something good.

PM: I know you’re about to leave on a Leftover Salmon tour. Will you also tour with The John Cowan Band behind these tunes, or play these tunes with Salmon, or...?

DE: A little of both. See, some of these tunes are songs we’ve been doing in Salmon for a while, so they’ll be in the repertoire anyhow. “Full Moon” and “Solid Ground” are in that category. “Bend in the River” and “Lonesome Road” are from *Ask the Fish*. Those tunes had only been recorded on live records, so I wanted to do them here again, in the studio.

PM: Ah, I see.

DE: But there's definitely going to be more shows with John, because that's how I want to promote this record. That's how we played it.

PM: And you guys have a great vocal blend that's a big part of *Freedom Ride*. Aside from John's major group of guys, a host of other luminaries appear on the record that I want to mention or discuss. What's Vassar Clements like, for instance?

DE: Oh, he's an awesome guy. He's still 18. The cat's an amazing spirit, very young at heart, and youthful in his appearance as well. He's spry, I don't even know how old he is.

PM: What's his trick, he works out or eats right, or neither?

DE: I couldn't tell you. He smokes a pipe, no cigarettes. I think he just has a really good time. He's very avant garde. He's been high profile for a long time, and there's nobody like him.

PM: Oh yeah, I dig that. He looks like such a classic redneck, and then he plays so beautifully weird whenever he gets the opportunity.

DE: We just let him go. I love the solo he took on "Rainmaker."

PM: That's a badass jam, all right.

DE: And to get him and Peter together, that was a gas. They were in Old & In The Way together, and were also Bluegrass Boys together [with Bill Monroe].

PM: Oh, I didn't know they played with him at the same time. So, "Rainmaker" is a song that Peter wrote with Nashville's Gary Nicholson, right?

DE: Yes. Peter was there to track "Memories of Mother and Dad." He happened to bump into Gary in the hallway of the studio we were working in. He came running back in and said, "Hey, you wanna record 'Rainmaker'?" And I said, "Sure."

PM: It's amazing how tunes get cut, sometimes so serendipitously.

DE: Yeah, and that's the only recorded version of that song with a band. Peter recorded it solo on *Dust Bowl Children*. He suggested we do it kind of honky tonk, and we had a great time with it. Ronnie McCoury's playing mandola.

PM: It's not so easy for me to pick out the mandola, because of the register, maybe.

DE: Yeah, it can be tough. It's an underlying thing that adds a lot.

PM: There's so much going on these days with the mandolin family of instruments, it seems. The octave mandolins and the mandolas, the new designs. Like Tim O'Brien, I see you're playing the Nugget mandolins of Mike Kemnitzer.

DE: Because of Tim. He was my first teacher.

PM: Really?

DE: Way back in 1980, in Boulder. I was a huge Hot Rize fan. One day at a show at the band shell, I approached him and asked if he gave any lessons. At that time, he still did. So I took three or four lessons at his house.

PM: How about a few words on Peter Rowan?

DE: Peter's voice is the closest thing to Bill Monroe's that I can think of, with his own modern twist. That's why I really wanted him on that song I mentioned. Peter came out for the week that we did some benefit shows for our banjo player Mark. We were just starting to talk about the record then, so I figured I'd ask him if he might be available. He said he'd probably be in Nashville mixing his own record at the time, so it could probably work out. We've known him about five years, from Telluride, mostly. He came out and did our Millennium New Year's at the Fillmore in Denver. We also had Sam Bush and John Cowan on that show. It was really great. We did Sam tunes, John tunes, Newgrass tunes, the whole deal. Peter and I did a duo set as well. It was really something.

Right after my son was born, about three years ago, Peter was at The Rocky Grass Festival, and I invited him up to our house in the mountains, and gave him our address. The Saturday of Rocky Grass we were sitting in the living room, it was pouring down rain. Who shows up in the driveway but Peter Rowan and his family. We had our newborn son there, and Peter and I sat in the living room and picked tunes while the storm raged outside. He played this tune that he wrote for Charles Sawtelle [the late guitar genius of Hot Rize]. As he was singing it, this huge lightning bolt lit up the sky and Peter said, "Hi, Charles." It was very powerful. Then we sang an old song of his called "Waiting for Elijah," which is my son's name.

We've shared some times. He's played with Leftover Salmon on the Telluride stage, too. There's this great picture inside our Live at Telluride CD where we're all kind of dancing in this chorus line with Peter. It's pretty funny. He's a real shaman.

PM: New subject. What do you use to get that steel drum sound with the mandolin?

DE: That is the Digitech Whammy Pedal. It does all kinds of cool things. It does different intervals, and the way I get the steel drum sound is the high octave interval. You can also set the whammy effect to go from way low to way high. It also has a chorus effect.

PM: How about [engineer] Dave Sinko? On top of being a great guy in the studio, then he contributes all those good photographs, the player shots as well as the skyscape on the inside of the CD.

DE: Dave is so great to work with, and is such a great personality. He's done Sam Bush albums, and *Friday Night in America* with Newgrass Revival. He did Edgar Meyer, too. When Bela and Edgar go on the road, they take him with them to do the front of house sound. He's definitely Sam's favorite. He and Sam both beat testicular cancer as well, that's another special bond between them. Dave just has such a keen sensibility for this music, how it should be mic'ed and recorded, and mixed. He really understands how to get the most out of the instruments involved.

PM: Did you pay much attention to the mics he was using?

DE: I believe he used a Neumann on the mandolin and a Rohrer on the vocals. He'd just gotten the Rohrer, it was something very special. He used Sennheisers and Shure '57s on the drums.

PM: Whom would you call your favorite songwriters?

DE: Joni Mitchell. Lowell George. Peter Rowan, Tim O'Brien, Bob Dylan. Greg Brown.

PM: He's one of my favorites, too.

DE: The first time I ever saw Greg Brown play was at the Strawberry Festival, when the Left Hand String Band played. He just blew me away. He had a song about summertime that I couldn't believe. It was so good.

PM: What are you listening to lately, and what are you reading?

DE: Let's see. I just got through reading the Harry Potter books. [laughter] My twelve year old daughter got us into them and my wife and I couldn't put them down! As far as listening goes, we've been listening to a lot of Alison Brown lately, and New Grange. My son's way into that, as well.

PM: Is he going to be a player?

DE: Oh yeah, already is. He's got a little fiddle, little mandolin, and a little guitar. And a little hand drum he plays a lot. He sings along, and when Sam comes on the radio, he knows who it is. He's pretty clued in.

PM: Wow, here's an email coming in from Shari of Compass as we speak. It says you're #1 most added at Americana this week, #4 most added Adult, and #27 with a bullet at Americana. Sounds good. Nice to see good music getting good airplay.

DE: Thanks, we're really excited about it.

PM: Did we finish who it is you're listening to lately?

DE: We listen to a lot of Bela Fleck, both his work with the Flecktones and his work with people like Edgar Meyer and Mike Marshall, and others. Victor Wooten's new album, too. Tim O'Brien. Mozart, Bach...and Jethro Burns, and Strength in Numbers.

PM: Is there a kind of music you haven't explored much that you'd like to play or write in the future?

DE: Yeah, I'd like to get into some New Orleans, swampy kind of stuff. We're big Little Feat fans, and have done some shows with them. I'm really inspired by Paul Barrere and Bill Payne, so that's something I'd like to get into more. And Anders Osborne, he's a great New Orleans songwriter and musician, I really admire the way he writes songs.

PM: So, what's gonna happen musically? Will Leftover Salmon stay together for along time?

DE: I hope so. Our aim is certainly to keep it going. It's tough to lose Mark, he was our brother. We lost him to melanoma on March 4th. He couldn't possibly be replaced. When we first met him on the campground at Telluride 13 years ago, we knew immediately we had to have him. He lived in VA at the time, and had come out and won the banjo contest. When he joined Leftover Salmon, he got an electric banjo and quickly developed this rock and roll banjo style that I've never heard duplicated.

This next tour, we're taking Matt Flinner out with us, he's great on quite a variety of instruments. And he's got a music degree, which is kind of unusual for a bluegrass musician. He's done a lot of playing with our bass player Greg Garrison, who also has a music degree. Although Mark will never be replaceable, it will be great to have someone as accomplished as Matt Flinner on the road with us, we're looking forward to that.

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