

## **A Conversation with Kyle Hollingsworth of the String Cheese Incident by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 6/2002)**

I was talking to my hippie niece's husband, brother Dave, on the phone not too long ago in Portland. When my niece Grace had gone into labor with her first child the day after the terrorist attacks, her dad and I jumped in a car in Music City and beat it out to the West Coast but quick. Got there in time, too, everything turned out perfect.

"Whatcha listening to, there? Sounds good." "String Cheese Incident," he replied. Sounded like a more bluegrassy Dead thing, I liked it. Made a note to look into it. When summer started coming on, I thought more about the very cool jamband thing that seems to be rolling through the nation. Phish seemed to be on hiatus, and some other acts were on the consequent rise, especially SCI.

I like the way the bluegrass festivals are welcoming in the jamband action, what a smart cross-pollination. Not only is it turning on the jamlovers to more bluegrass acts, some of these jambands have actually come from bluegrass themselves. Especially the String Cheese Incident. Their guitarist, Phil Nershi, actually plays acoustic all night, and does plenty of good lead work on it. Violinist and electric mandolinist Michael Kang gets a lot of the jamlight and is a monster, but Nershi is an understated but very accomplished player. The whole band is strong, for a handful of ski bums that spread their Colorado popularity across the hippie nation in the last 10 years and five records.

The enviable journey of The String Cheese Incident has aspects of both a hipster fairy tale and a solid business plan. Not only do they own their own record company that has sold over 150,000 records, they have their own ticketing agency (that sells tickets at reduced service fees for a growing number of bands) *and* their own travel agency that books flights and accommodations for their fans, other bands, and their fans... And their merchandising is predictably together: I think I counted about 25 different t-shirts available with the SCI logo prominently (but always tastefully) displayed. These guys mean business, literally.

But what turns me on is the spirit in which it's all done. It's about good vibes, it's about fun, and all that is really believable and palpable at an SCI concert. I saw one recently at the legendary Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, courtesy of Madison House Inc., their booking and management company (thanks to Carrie for all her help).

"Wow, is this the Ryman parking lot?" I said to myself. The streets and the big parking facility were full of longhairs, socializing with the energy of far flung, close friends that only see each other at shows. They looked and acted just like I did when I was in my twenties. I picked up my tickets at the will call, and had an extra to give away, so I went looking for the right person. Naturally, I was looking for a cute hippie girl at first, and then busted myself. So I changed gears and looked around for a guy that reminded me of myself at his age. Didn't take long. A smiley guy with long dreads had a finger up in the air. I asked if that meant he had a ticket or needed a ticket. He said it meant he needed one, so I forked one over. When he was done hugging me, I moved inside. The median age seemed to be around 23 or so. "Why'd I wear a nice shirt, I feel so conspicuous..." Okay, let's see, J9, I started down a promising aisle in front of the stage and stopped. "Hell, I'm in the middle of...that?" The music was just beginning, and the whole place was already on their feet, and I realized that's exactly where they were going to be the whole concert. "Oh, so it's like that, huh..." Anyhow, I climbed in back of my dancing aisle and jumped into my little space.

The band made a disclaimer about cleaning up after ourselves, and no smoking in the auditorium. Right. All around me, everybody was firing up one hit bowls and hooting and howling, drinking beer sold in the lobby. The girl next to me, I don't know what her trip was, exactly. But after she'd do a hit, which was pretty reglar, she'd let out a scream that I thought would shatter my eardrums. I

like to hoot and holler at shows myself, but it wasn't like that. It was the blood curdling scream of a knifing victim, like someone just stuck her right in the ribs. Whatever. Then she'd look at me like "Get into it, Grandpa..." I knew it wouldn't make any sense to explain that I was seeing the Dead and the New Riders in NYC when her parents were conceiving her on acid, so I just considered alternate locations to enjoy the show.

There was a blue haired lady barring the way to the balcony. I knew that ordinarily they wouldn't let you up there with a floor seat ticket, so I gave her my rap. "Ma'am, I have a good floor seat ticket, but I need to find a safer place to park myself. These hippies are gonna kill me!" "Oh, I know what you mean," she said. "Why don't you go and talk to one of the ushers, maybe they can help you." Once inside, I started cruising for a place to hang. They were dancing everywhere, like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or something. I'd forgotten what it was like. It's all knees and elbows flying, not like *Soul Train* or something. Big tall guys come hurtling through space at you doing the Goat Dance or the Wizard Dance. One guy came flying out of a trance circle at me with his eyes on fire, glaring at me. "Damn, it's the Charlie Manson Dance," I shuddered. I was dodging psychedelic collisions all the way to the soundboard, where I found a little rail to lean on. The soundman looked over and saw I was no threat to his gear, nodded at me. I was in, and found my little power spot. The lights were fantastic, the band was rippin it. I'd never seen the Ryman look or feel anything like this before. As a stoned friend of mine used to say, "It's like deja vu all over again."

A week or so later, when we went to New Orleans to catch the Steve Kimock Band, a number of the SCI members were also at the show. They had played a date themselves that night, a few hours before. It was a shame we didn't meet up backstage there or something, but I did catch up with them on the telephone, in the heat of their busy touring schedule.

**Puremusic:** As far as I can gather from the promo material on the band, you came into the scene after the mid 90s. It seems like that contributed to the band's musical scope widening from a more bluegrass based outfit to one that started incorporating more styles, more jazz. Is that picture accurate?

**Kyle Hollingsworth:** Yeah, to some degree—but they were on that road already when I joined the band. That's one of the things that attracted me to it, was the fact that they were so open minded about mixing styles and exploring different types of music. That's what brought me in, I think. So I was able to contribute something, but at the same time, I believe they'd been on their way there already.

**PM:** So when you came in, there had been no previous keyboard player, right? You were the first one that they used?

**KH:** Correct. I was the first keyboard player. They'd had a banjo player, I think, for a while. Tony Furtado played with them a couple times. And I think somebody else played on their album. But I was the first keyboard player on tour.

**PM:** So how many years of SCI were rather strictly bluegrass?

**KH:** Probably two and a half, of mostly bluegrass. It's always been kind of bluegrass/calypso, because our drummer brought in his influences, which were very Afro-Cuban sort of things, so there was that inkling from the early period as well.

**PM:** One is led to conjecture that it's the bluegrass roots that kept Bill Nershi playing acoustic on stage, is that right?

**KH:** Yeah. I think he and Keith were the ones who were really especially keen on keeping the bluegrass—which I’m a hack about, really—elemental in the repertoire. And I think he found that he could do almost anything on the acoustic guitar, from an Afro high life feel to, you know, a more jazz or even classical feeling.

**PM:** Well, he can, yeah, I agree. And part of that is how well it’s picked up. It’s real hi-fi, and very solo suitable. How is he picking that up? He’s a Sunrise guy, isn’t he?

**KH:** Sunrise, yes, I think so...

**PM:** That’s what I use, too. They’re fabulous.

**KH:** Yeah. He’s been happy with that. And of course he has all this stuff in line with it, which I have no idea about, but all sorts of different EQs and processing.

**PM:** I may try to search him out about the acoustic chain.

**KH:** [laughs] Yeah.

**PM:** Because it’s hard to get an acoustic sounding good in a rock band.

**KH:** Yeah. That was actually the first thing I noticed, the very first thing when I went to see them play because my friend Michael Kang was in the band. I’d played with Michael in a different band, and he said, “Come on, check out this group I got together.” So I checked it out, and I was like, “Man, who’s the eighteen-year-old on the acoustic guitar? He’s great.” I was playing in a typical rock band where, you know, the sound didn’t matter, it was just the jangly part of the acoustic guitar that mattered.

**PM:** Just strumming, yeah.

**KH:** Strumming. But he got such a great tone, I thought, “Man, that was great.” Of course, back then, Billy looked—he shaved, and he looked like he was eighteen, but I think he’s still the oldest member of the band. [laughs]

**PM:** Is he?

**KH:** I think so.

**PM:** So there’s something about SCI, while being very adventurous, it’s also really—I mean, the word—almost “wholesome” comes to mind, it’s so positive.

**KH:** Too damn positive!

**PM:** [laughs] Never that, but certainly very positive and, you know, almost to the point of being wholesome. And I mean that in a good sense. What kind of personalities make up the band?—from your point of view, since that’s subjective.

**KH:** Yeah, from my point of view. I guess we... “Wholesome”? Geez, I would definitely not use that word, because it has so many negative connotations—

**PM:** But it does seem that positive, at least to me.

**KH:** I would say that everybody in the band is really, I think, on a good path, in a way that we are

not being tempted by a lot of the trappings of being in our position right now. There's no real serious drug use in the band, for instance. We're all super focused on trying to be good musicians outside of the band, plus bringing in creative input, and being better bandmates, as far as interaction in the band, and bringing different types of songs in. I mean, we all want to become better as a unit. So we'll practice—you know, sometimes we'll practice jamming or we'll practice interaction, different things, as far as who will lead the solo, or lead a section, and kind of learning how to back them up. We just really take music very seriously.

**PM:** Beautiful.

**KH:** And so maybe in that sense we're just maybe construed as “wholesome” [laughs], but really it's just *focused*.

**PM:** Yeah. And growth oriented.

**KH:** Right.

**PM:** Spiritually too? Is spirituality a strong force in the band or in any of the members?

**KH:** Not in the Judeo-Christian sense, as more—

**PM:** Or, say, Eastern things or—

**KH:** I'd say potentially more Eastern, and more reflection oriented, and looking inside yourself sort of thing. I guess it would be Eastern.

**PM:** Some meditators in the band?

**KH:** And meditative, yeah, for sure. I'd say that no one's really directly involved in any particular religion. I think it's all kind of something we're all in tune with in some sense. We're not at odds with each other, as far as that's concerned.

**PM:** Well, it seems like a highly communicative band. I mean, that's the real secret of great bands. First, in REM, I've heard that one of the ways they go about their democracy is what they call the “Rule of No.” That is, if anybody's final answer is no, then the group's answer is no.

**KH:** Ahh.

**PM:** Does anything like that exist in SCI?

**KH:** No. I'm not sure that would really work with us. [laughs] It's majority rules sometimes in this situation.

**PM:** Right. And there are a lot of three-two votes.

**KH:** Yes.

**PM:** Is touring what's fun about your life, or a necessary evil?

**KH:** Different people in the band have different reactions. My reaction is that I love to tour, it's really fun. I think that's where the band is at its height. I think sometimes when we get in the studio, it's not necessarily our best performance. But when we're out there playing live, especially mid-tour, it gets a lot better. And I think for some people who have families, it's a little more difficult.

But I think all of us enjoy it.

**PM:** Although you've been known as a live outfit and a great jamming outfit, certainly *Outside Inside* took steps toward establishing you as adept songwriters.

**KH:** Well, that's good. I'm glad you interpret it that way.

**PM:** Yeah. I mean, it certainly sounds like that to me. I caught the recent Ryman show, because I live in Nashville. And the combination of that, and *Outside Inside*, made me a definite fan.

**KH:** The Ryman, that was one of my favorite shows, actually. The Ryman, and then the next couple nights were really good. That was mid-tour, so we were definitely getting it on.

**PM:** You were, yeah. The lights were fantastic, the band was really smokin. It was super. I was interested in the crowd demographic of the Ryman show, and the Kimock show I saw in New Orleans recently—where I think some of you guys were also, because you'd gigged earlier in the evening, right?

**KH:** Oh, right, yeah. I wasn't there, but a couple of the guys were.

**PM:** The demographics of both of those shows looked really young, and yet both acts are making records very suitable for people of all ages. I wonder how that bridge will be made toward selling your music to the older crowd, the thirties and forties, and to some degree, the fifty-something people.

**KH:** Well, I don't think we purposely made an adult contemporary album. [laughs]

**PM:** No...

**KH:** Not adult contemporary. I'm just kidding. But we just did what we're doing. I feel like we were lucky enough to have a really good producer, Steve Berlin, who was able to go for more of a live feeling for the studio album. And he kind of chose the songs and kind of arranged them in a way that was a little bit more—I don't know, it would appeal to all generations, or across the board.

**PM:** Yeah. Because I think that really rang true. And my question really is about that. It came across that this was not just a young person's album, this is anybody's album.

**KH:** Right, right. Well, he was very good at that. I thought he took the meat of the songs and decided, "This is what's important. And you can do the jamming when you play live." He'd let us go a little long, and we stretched out a little on "Roll It Over," which was nice.

**PM:** How did he actually track the tunes? Did the band do the basics all together?

**KH:** Yeah. We had a pre-production week or two, and we went and hung out in our little practice area. And he came down and made tapes of everything, then he went home and listened. It was the first time we'd worked with a producer, so it was hard to give up any kind of creative control. And we were like, "Ah, I don't know if that's a good idea."

And then, the first day we got in the studio, the first take—the very first take on the first day, you know, he said, "Okay. That's it. Next tune." And we're like, "No, no, no. We can do it tons better! I know we can do it better! We can do better." And he's like, "No, no. That's it. If you don't trust me, you can fire me right now." We're like, "Okay. So that's the way it's going to go..."

**PM:** Wow.

**KH:** So it was basically like, the first cut on *Outside Inside* is the first take, first day. And there was all sorts of sloppiness in it that I would have fixed up. But I think he was just kind of going for the vibe.

**PM:** Oh, and that has great spirit, though, that first cut.

**KH:** Right, right. So that's kind of what he was going for, I think.

**PM:** I remember my brother Jon and I were at home, and we were talking about String Cheese. He's a manager of talent. And he said, "Well, put it on. Let's listen to it." And it was after those first few bars of *Outside Inside* that he walked right over to the stereo and cranked it right up and said, "Okay. This is good."

**KH:** [laughs] Well, I guess Steve knows what he's doing.

**PM:** Yeah, I think that was a good call. What are you personally listening to lately, and what are you reading?

**KH:** I just finished a book by Kenny Werner called *Effortless Mastery*. It's a kind of a Zen approach to music. It's about taking a less critical approach to music, and being more intuitive about it. Because I'm kind of a studied musician, and I'm always analyzing. And it was great to read this book that said, "Well, stop the discipline and sit down and play nothing." [laughs] So it was a great book for me.

What have I been listening to...? Right now I'm working on a Keith Jarrett solo off of a live album he just put out. Always some Herbie stuff, Herbie Hancock. Mainly jazz stuff.

**PM:** Where did you study music?

**KH:** In Baltimore. I went to Towson State University. I studied jazz piano there, and I got a degree in performance. It's a good place.

**PM:** You guys have been known to bring a number of people at different times on stage to play with the band. Steve Kimock, for instance—I like that you guys have what seems to be a real musical cross-pollination going on between you, at least from time to time.

**KH:** From time to time, sure, yeah. He's great. He's an awesome player.

**PM:** Yeah. I'm sorry I missed that show. Whom would you like to see or hear on stage with the band that you haven't experienced yet?

**KH:** That's a good question. It would be neat to see Carlos Santana play with us.

**PM:** Indeed.

**KH:** That would be fun. Let me think of some more obscure people.

**PM:** Like a horn guy. Who would be a horn guy that you guys might want?

**KH:** Michael Brecker would be great. Joshua Redman is a possibility, actually. That would be

great.

**PM:** Yeah, that makes sense.

**KH:** He's traveling in some similar circles. He's dipping down into the hippie generation circles a little bit, I think.

**PM:** And well he might.

**KH:** [laughs] Yeah. And singers, it would be great to get some singers. There's Angelique Kidjo, who sang with us recently. It was neat to have a vocalist sitting in, which doesn't often happen with us. So that would be kind of something to look forward to. Like Bonnie Raitt or something, you know?

**PM:** Yeah. And I'll bet she, too, dips into different demographics.

**KH:** Yeah.

**PM:** I think that there's an atmosphere about SCI that really makes that possible. It's kind of a wide-eyed, big-eared, open-minded outfit.

**KH:** Definitely.

**PM:** And that's a lovely quality. Along those same lines, where would you like to stage an international incident, as they're called, that you haven't been yet?

**KH:** It would be neat to get to New Zealand or something, get farther away, maybe. We are going to Japan at the end of the summer.

**PM:** Is that your first time there?

**KH:** The first time there, yes. We're playing the Fuji Rock Festival.

**PM:** You know, Kimock did some dates there recently.

**KH:** How was that for him?

**PM:** I think they had very, very good shows there. I didn't get to talk with him about it as much, but I read about it on his site.

**KH:** Well, we'll see what happens. I think we're working on some dates for an incident. I haven't really heard any details yet, but there's a lot of planning.

**PM:** But Australia and New Zealand, somewhere far away.

**KH:** That would be fun, yeah.

**PM:** So we were talking about *Outside Inside* establishing you, which I think it clearly did, as serious songwriters. Who are the songwriters you admire at this time in your life? Who moves you that way?

**KH:** Good question.

**PM:** Since you're a jazzer, especially, it's an odd question.

**KH:** Yeah, yeah. [laughs] I've always admired Lyle Lovett as a songwriter. As far as songwriters that have influenced my life, I think about the Beatles, anything by John Lennon. The current ones, I haven't really listened to a whole lot of current songwriters.

**PM:** I think a lot of current musicians still go back to the classic songwriters.

**KH:** I know.

**PM:** Bob Dylan, the Beatles.

**KH:** Right. Makes you wonder. That's a good point. But there are a lot of great musicians out there right now, playing really well. Oh, I think Anders Osborne is a great songwriter.

**PM:** You know, I've been hearing about this guy. I've got to get up with him. I don't know his music. And he's a Texan, too, right?

**KH:** I think so, I think so.

**PM:** That's a blind spot for me. I've got to get to him.

So, I think we've covered the questions I have. Sometimes they get covered in record time. You're a fast thinker and a fast talker.

**KH:** Fast talker? All right, man. Well, thank you for your time today.

**PM:** You bet, Kyle. I look forward to doing the story on the band. And best of luck. You guys are really doing a good thing.

**KH:** Thanks. Take care.

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