

## **BAND TO WATCH COLUMN**

BLUEGRASS NOW, SEPTEMBER, 2007 JAMES LEVA & PURGATORY MOUNTAIN LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA BY DAVE HIGGS

“Old-time music—it’s better than it sounds . . .” James Leva and the members of Purgatory Mountain—Al Tharp (banjo and bass), Danny Knicely (guitar and mandolin) and Matty Olwell (percussion)—are laughing uproariously at some of the cruel pronouncements that have been heaped on old-time music. “Where I live in Virginia, the general opinion of old-time music is that it’s played by people who aren’t good enough on their instruments to play bluegrass,” James, a renowned fiddler, guitarist and banjoist who could (and has) held his own with anybody, grins.

“Can one quote Bill Monroe here?” Al politely inquires, as the conversation instantly becomes deathly quiet with everyone eagerly anticipating the punch line. “When he was 16, our friend Richie Stearns, a great clawhammer banjo player, was just coming into his own. He met Bill Monroe at a festival and Bill, in his grand way, asked, ‘Well, what do you play, son?’ Richie said, ‘Well, I play old-time banjo.’ Bill looked down at him and chuckled, ‘Wouldn’t cross the street to hear an old timey band.’”

In truth, the Big Mon would not only have crossed the street, but probably even driven across town to hear this transcendent and hypnotic quartet. Named after a peak near James’ residence, Purgatory Mountain has kept the soul of its collective old-time and bluegrass roots while concocting a powerful, compelling and completely original sound which borrows heavily from the repertoires of such old timey icons as Tommy Jarrell, Fields Ward and Hobart Smith as well as from James’ seemingly infinite vault of stellar originals. “What makes this band interesting is that we are divergent,” Al, who previously teamed with James in Plank Road and the Freewill Savages, comments. “Matty has all this Irish material that he knows and plays. Danny has a fantastic bluegrass instrumental background. I think of us more as an original band that plays some old time tunes.”

“When Danny backs me up on guitar, he’s not playing the typical boom-chuck three chord background that a typical player would do for rhythm,” James explains, attempting to explain some of the elements that set the band apart. “He plays lots of moving chords like a jazz or Celtic guitarist.”

“I’m pretty sure I heard Danny work in a James Brown riff on the last gig,” Al interjects, evoking more laughter from the guys. “He had a bit of a ‘Sex Machine’ chord progression in there.”

Danny has also studied music in such exotic locales as Nepal, China and Tibet and is eagerly exploring the elements such indigenous music shares with the sounds of the Southern Appalachians. “Because of the similarity of some of the instruments and the way they are tuned, a lot of their music sounds strikingly similar to old time fiddle music,” Danny reports.

“You mean their music all sounds alike, too?” James asks in mock innocence to the howling laughter of the band.

“And a lot of their song content is similar as well,” Danny continues, undaunted by James’ outburst, “just because of the simple way they live is like the way people used to live here. They even have songs about chickens.”

At the word “chickens,” the band immediately springs to life. “One day, my neighbor, seeing his world changing, complained to me that when he needed salt or coffee or something that he used to be able to take a chicken down to the store and trade it,” James recalls. ‘But you can’t do that anymore,’ my friend lamented. ‘By God,’ he shouted, ‘you can’t even GIVE a man a chicken nowadays!’ To him, that was proof the world had gone to hell.”

Matty provides perhaps the most striking contribution to the band’s sound with his mesmerizing percussion, which he provides with the cajon and bodhran (drums from Cuba and Ireland, respectively), hamboning, clogging, flatfooting and dancing. “There’s sort of this vicarious thrill that you get if you’re watching a dancer because you are, whether you realize it or not, already wanting to get up and dance,” Matty astutely observes.

Al’s spirited vocals and proficiency on a variety of instruments add an energized dimension to the band’s eclecticism. Among other things, Al utilizes African drum rhythms in his clawhammer banjo playing which are heard in profusion on “When We Have Love,” one of James’ originals from the group’s 2007 debut on Copper Creek, Winkin’ Eye. “Our friend, Dave Grant, had a mantra which was, ‘if it sounds o.k., it’ll sound even better with foam stuck up under it,’ Al reports. “Basically, I just stick a piece of sponge foam underneath the strings next to the bridge so that there’s much more percussiveness than tonality.”

“So, it kind of almost makes it sounds in tune?” Danny asks, to even more laughter.

James’ fiery fiddling, thoughtful tunes, unabashed joy, reckless abandon and deep respect for tradition complete the package. “The best old-time music, he summarizes, “is that instead of being linear, it’s on a depth level where all of a sudden something bursts across the surface that you’ve been tracing underneath. It jumps into your consciousness because of some rhythmic or harmonic junction it gets with the other stuff. You can talk about this music on a mystical level and then every once in a while you remember about all the guys throwing up and getting loud and drunk and that sort of breaks the [spell].”

“That’s right,” Al enthusiastically concurs. “It wouldn’t be old-time without that.”

More information on James Leva and Purgatory Mountain can be found at [jamesleva.com](http://jamesleva.com). Bands wishing to appear in “Band to Watch” should send their most recent CD, band photo and promo materials to Dave Higgs, PO Box 4369, Clarksburg, WV 26302-4369.