

Porch Talk Interviews by Dave Berry

James Reams

This month's chat is with James Reams, a nationally known musician, songwriter and bandleader with close to three decades in the bluegrass world. He's played major festivals on the West and East Coasts and worked with many legends in the industry. James has recorded nine albums — one nominated as Recorded Event of the Year by IBMA, and had the pleasure to get to know many of the first-generation bluegrass originators. In 2013, he released a full-length documentary film, *Making Music with Pioneers of Bluegrass: Tales of the Early Days in Their Own Words*, which features their stories.

DB: Congratulations James, on your new album "Rhyme & Season." How did you come up with that title?

JR: *Rhyme & Season* is a play on the adage "no rhyme or reason" describing something that happens for no apparent reason. It's about life experiences that don't always have an explanation. I included "season" in the title because I've reached that season in my life when I can look back over all the things that have happened and recognize the lessons learned from some of them. You know, Dave, we're all pilgrims on life's journey — some of us get to choose the path we're on and others have no choice. This concept bluegrass album, a rarity in bluegrass is about that journey.

DB: Tell us about your first connections to this music.

JR: I was raised in rural Kentucky near the Renfro Valley, which is known for its barn dances. My earliest memories involve music, sitting with my father at picking sessions. All that instilled a passion for this music in me. Listening to the radio and watching television, I got to see and hear lots of bluegrass music as a kid, and it made such an impression on me that I knew even at that early age it was something I wanted to devote my life to.

DB: That sounds pretty idyllic, what came next?

JR: Like many folks, I've had a few wild hairs in my life. As a teenager, I decided to leave home and ended up in Florida trying to make it on my own. My cash ran out pretty quick and I ended up homeless, living on the streets. When an old man died on the bunk below me at a shelter one night where I was staying, I realized that this way of living robbed you of any dignity and kept you constantly on edge against all kinds of predators, including death. The song \$100 Funeral on the new album evokes memories of this season in my life.

DB: Wow, that's a complete reversal, how did you rebound from that?

JR: Well I returned home, finished my college degree and then decided that the Big Apple was where I



James Reams & the Barnstormers.

needed to go to make it in the music business. I got on a Greyhound bus and headed off to New York City. I was drawn to the music scene in Greenwich Village and fortunately was taken under the wing of Tom Paley from the New Lost City Ramblers. Tom was a great mentor and I got to cut an album with him called *The Mysterious Redbirds*. He taught me how to balance music as a performer and a listener. He really opened up the past to me and that has heavily influenced my songwriting and song preferences.

DB: That was great time to be there, what about more recent chapters?

JR: Now that I've reached a more mature season in my life, I wanted to do something that would allow me to give back to the bluegrass community and my country. It's my hope that *Rhyme & Season* will be a voice for the voiceless and introduce more bluegrass listeners, through songs like *I Am a Stranger Here*, to those who wander our streets, providing lyrical faces if not literal names that might touch their hearts.

DB: What other mentors have you had in bluegrass?

JR: My father always told me never to give up on my dreams and "don't be like anyone else!" I've tried to honor his memory in all of my accomplishments. I've had the privilege to work with the great bluegrass legend, Walter Hensley. Walter was an incredible banjo player, and I made two albums with him: *Barons of Bluegrass* and *Wild Card*. He became a great friend and his stories about the early days made me appreciate what the founding fathers of bluegrass did to establish this music that is so widely known to this day.

Then there's Ken Irwin of Rounder Records who I first met at IBMA World of Bluegrass. He's always been very supportive and gave me advice on how to present a band. When my life partner, Tina, was dying of cancer, he personally contacted me and talked me through the entire process, sharing what he'd

been through when he lost a loved one to cancer. Ken has been an exceptional mentor to many people in this industry and I'm honored to call him a friend. I would be remiss if I neglected to mention Gary Reid who gave me a huge break early on when he agreed to produce three of my albums on his Copper Creek record label. I learned so much from him during that process that has carried through every album I've made.

DB: What do you consider your greatest career accomplishments?

JR: Maintaining a band for over 25 years in the music industry has been my most difficult and greatest accomplishment. Many bands make a big splash and then disappear off the face of the earth. Throughout our history together, my band has always been well received. Great bands make it look easy; audiences don't see the work that goes on behind the scenes to create that exciting performance. Every member plays a role that makes the others better, which makes the band as a whole tick like a fine watch.

DB: What are some of the other highlights from your career?

JR: The IBMA nomination as Emerging Artist of the Year was certainly a highlight, as well as the IBMA nomination for 2002 Recorded Event of the Year. A festival that I started and have been promoting for 15 years, the Park Slope Old-Time and Bluegrass Music Jamboree in Brooklyn, was nominated as IBMA Event of the Year in 2014. I was a featured performer at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in NYC and have performed on the TV show *Song of the Mountains*. Appearing on the *Merry Go-Round*, which is the third longest running live music show on radio was another big thrill.

DB: What bands have influenced your music?

JR: Early on, I was really moved by some of the lesser-known names in bluegrass like Earl Taylor, Vern Williams, Sid Campbell, Landon Mess-

er, the Church Brothers, Connie and Babe, and Cliff Waldron. These were acts that I would've given my eye teeth to see...they were edgy and different; their sound was bluegrass but they put their own unique stamp on it. That's what I hope I've accomplished in my career.

DB: Tell us about your current band.

JR: I'm really excited to include band members from both the East and West Coast Barnstormers on this album. The West Coast band includes my buddy Billy Parker on mandolin and harmony, Michael Rolland on fiddle, Dan Meyer on bass, banjo pickin' from Tyler James and Evan Ward. Evan Ward and Dick Brown also laid down some of the vocals. The East Coast recordings featured legendary fiddler Kenny Kosek, as well as my longtime bandmates Mark Farrell on mandolin and harmony, Doug Nicolaisen on banjo, and Nick Sullivan on bass and harmony. This album represents all facets of James Reams & The Barnstormers.

DB: What are your connections to California?

JR: As a lifetime IBMA member, I try to go as often as I can to the World of Bluegrass. For years, I played at the CBA suite at that event — first in Louisville and also in Nashville. I met many great people and remember packed rooms, but because I was still based on the East Coast, it didn't translate into shows for me out west. It was just too expensive to bring a band all the way from New York to California. When I moved to the southwest in 2011, things started happening! My band has since played many places in California, including festivals in Plymouth, Sebastopol, Blythe, San Diego, Ramona, Susanville, and coming up this year the Bluegrass in the Spring Festival at Calico Ghost Town in Yermo outside of Barstow. We've also performed in Mountain View, San Bernardino, and Burbank. The response has been so positive that California seems like home.

It was especially thrilling when Michael Hall selected two of my films to be in the lineup for the 2013 and 2014 Bluegrass on Broadway Festival in Redwood City. I was also honored to be a guest writer for the CBA on-line "Welcome" column for two years and have been a proud card carrying member of the CBA since I moved here in 2011.

DB: So you are pretty active in IBMA then?

JR: Yes and I'm excited to have been selected to attend the IBMA Leadership Bluegrass event this year. About 25 members are selected each year to participate through a tightly contested application process. This highly successful program is designed to help develop leaders in the business side of our music and increase networking opportunities across the various career spe-



Dave Berry

cialties. I'm going to be there with CBA President Darby Brandt. I remember the very first festival I played in California when Darby came up and asked me about joining the CBA. Then she scratched her head and said, "Oh, yeah, I remember you're a member already!" We had a great laugh about that.

DB: What advice can you share with newcomers to bluegrass music?

JR: Ha, well I've learned a few things the hard way. Some of the lessons are small but still important, like call before you get to the hotel so they don't give away your room before you arrive there exhausted at 3:00 in the morning! Some lessons have been big ones, like how to treat your "collaborators" and how to listen to your bandmates. Another thing I've learned is it's important to differentiate yourself from the pack. Something that I like to do is record my albums live in the studio. That involves a huge amount of prep work, including multiple rehearsals of the new material, sweating over the details, and then hoping that the magic happens as we record. That magic happened a lot as we recorded *Rhyme & Season*. I'm especially fond of the way we were able to instrumentalize the sounds of the highway in the song *Born to Roll*. To me, that gives my albums an edgy, straight-from-the-heart sound. It may not be as polished as some artists' albums, but it truly reflects our live performances.

DB: Any final words for our readers?

JR: After Tina's death, which was followed closely by the death of my mother, I spent a lot of time working through the grief process and trying to find balance in my life. I realized that my life was missing a spiritual component and I was being guided to find my way again. That's where the original song *Lord, Lead the Way* came from. I had to let go of the past and wanted to make a difference in the future. I've come to believe that we should consume life the way we do food, savoring every bite for its wisdom, power and grace. Many folks today are trying to find themselves by becoming something they aren't and trying to fit in with everyone else. Rather than finding ourselves in everything, I've learned that it's better to find everything in ourselves.

DB: That's a great outlook on life. Thanks for your time, James.

JR: Why thank you Dave.