

The GROOVEGRASS Paradox

With the release of two singles, "Rocky Top" on Decca and "Macarena" on Imprint, a musical form called GrooveGrass has entered the musical lexicon. Intriguingly, GrooveGrass has taken a music based in bluegrass into the country and hip urban dance halls and up the charts reporting on this music. GrooveGrass delivers funk up bluegrass, spliced and diced into a sound for today's dance all night youth. Yet, the artists playing this new style include such revolutionaries as Mac Wiseman, Doc Watson, Wilma Lee Cooper, and the Del McCoury Band. Its mastermind, Scott Rouse, moreover is a died-in-the-wool traditional bluegrass fan.

Scott's explanation: "The concept is to get people who have never heard bluegrass into bluegrass through GrooveGrass." Rouse explains. "Bluegrass people aren't my target, it's young kids, people who don't know bluegrass exists. That's who I'm targeting. That's what GrooveGrass is going after, and I think it's working because talking to folks, especially to Mac, their sales are going up. So it's working, and the same thing with 'Macarena.' Bluegrass fans are already in the bag; they already like bluegrass. I don't want to offend any bluegrass people, because I do care about bluegrass people, and I do care about bluegrass, but as far as GrooveGrass goes, I don't care whether they like it or not because that's not whom I'm after."

It must be working. According to Rouse, both "Rocky Top" and "The Macarena" reached the Top Ten in the *Billboard* singles sales charts and stayed there for months. "The estimates are 'Rocky Top' sold around 100,000 singles, more than that for 'The Macarena.' So they're selling a lot. They're commercially viable. They play them on the radio."

And the two dance mix/bluegrass hybrids rule the dance halls. "They're still on the country club charts. I think 'Macarena' peaked at two and 'Rocky Top' at five, and they're still both in the top ten [in June 1997]. In *Billboard* they were talking about how they're country club standards, classics now...They have been out for less than a year and are already termed dance club classics. So they should be around for a long time."

Rouse, whose dad Jim designed a guitar called "The Ragtime Special" with famed luthier J.W. Gallagher, met Doc

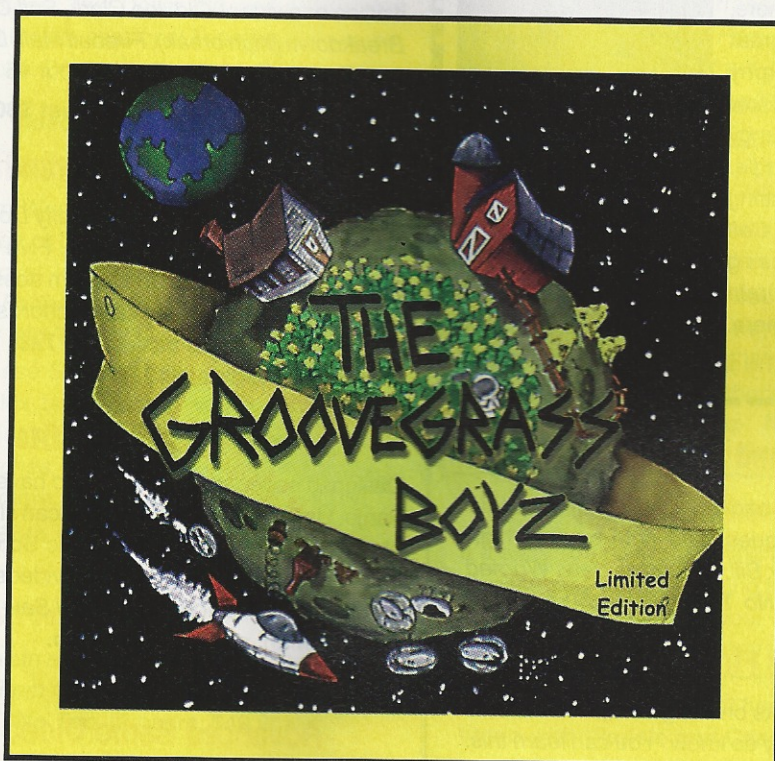
and actually get a deal with it. That was 10 years ago. I was doing it mostly one club mix at a time on an acetate thing. They'd spin it one time, and that would be it. That would be the last of it. Doc said, 'You should go to Nashville and see if you can get a deal doing that kind of stuff.' So that's when I moved up here. It was the last part of '87.

"I grew up listening to bluegrass from my father, who's heavy into that and traditional American music," Rouse explains. "Being raised hard-core into that, when I got to high school I got into Van Halen and all that rock stuff." While training to be a studio musician at the Berkeley College of Music in Boston, he quickly found himself working sessions more than going to school and eventually dropped out.

"The guys I was living with at the time were producers already...They had already done this band of kids, New Edition, who were young but went on to be pretty famous. So we ended up doing New Kids On The Block, which was one of my roommates, Maurice Starr's ideas. For doing those records, I was just constantly doing R&B records, funk records, and dance records.

"Then all of a sudden I started listening to bluegrass again. I'd been missing it. When I had down time at the studio, I recorded 'Deep River Blues,' and all that stuff I'd get from Doc and Flatt and Scruggs, but record them like I would R&B records...I make these things called acetates—you'd get a little record of what you just recorded and mixed, and take it out to a club and spin it and see if anybody liked it. So they'd spin these little bluegrass dance things I'd do, and people would just go nuts for them."

That's how GrooveGrass earned its name. "We went to this place in Boston on Lansdowne Street called the Spit. The

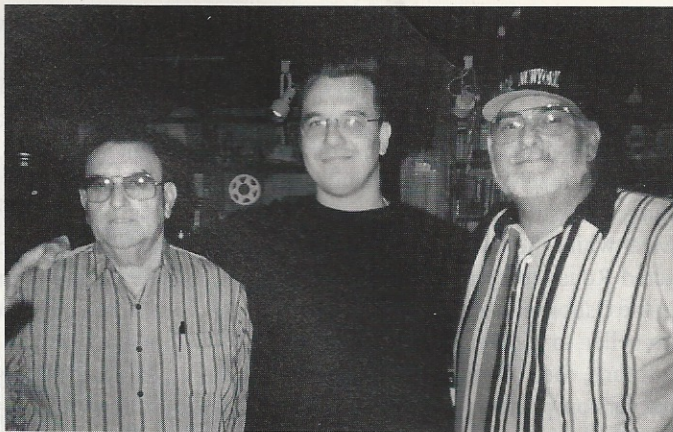


Watson as a little kid. "Merle Watson's style of slide playing is kind of what of the whole thing is based on. Especially on my album, the arrangements and stuff are all based on that Merle style of slide playing. I learned how to play slide from him, 90% of my arrangements for GrooveGrass I do on slide," Rouse noted. Over the past 15 years Doc and Scott have grown close. "He was actually one of the people who encouraged me to move to Nashville to do GrooveGrass

By Art Menius

Right, L-R: Bobby Osborne, Scott and Sonny Osborne.

Below, L-R: Scott, Mac Wiseman, Terry Herd, Ronnie McCoury and Del McCoury.



hard-core dance stuff upstairs was called DV-8. I'd been to another club the week before and spun 'Cypress Grove' or something. I saw a DJ from that club deejaying at this place. He said, 'Hey, man, got any of that GrooveGrass with you?'

"So finally I packed up everything and moved to Nashville, and I was literally laughed out of every office in town. I know

those guys now. This was like 10 years ago. We'd talk about this cross between bluegrass and dance music, and I'd play some for them. They'd laugh and throw me out."

This went on for two years, during which Scott cut some GrooveGrass for RCA/BMG that never got released as label personnel changed. Frustrated, he started

approaching labels proposing dance remixes of country hits. More laughter followed until he reached Warner Brothers. Rouse convinced Warner to let him reconstruct Jon Anderson's "Swingin'," but Anderson refused to permit its release.

"In the meantime, somehow tapes had gotten out, and the thing went all over town. First thing you know, label heads are calling me wanting to do these country dance remixes. So I started doing that stuff for a while, and country dance mixes got big. At the time I was still cutting bluegrass and funk stuff at the house. [Warner Brothers] said, 'Look, why don't you do a record of whatever it is you want to do. Let's put it out and see what happens.'"

That led to Scott's first album, due out in spring 1998 on Warner Brothers. "It ended up being GrooveGrass. I said, 'I'm going to get Doc Watson and Bootsyz

L-R: Mike Bub, Del McCoury, Terry Eldredge, Mac Wiseman, Scott Rouse, Gene Wooten (partially hidden), Doc Watson, Jim Rouse, Darren Smith, Ronnie McCoury and Gary Paczosa.



Collins, hard-core 'grass guys and hard-core funk guys, and we'll just go and make a record.' So that's where all that came from...Like the GrooveGrass Boyz record, my album has Doc and Bootsy Collins. And there's a duet Mac Wiseman and I did that came out really cool."

Meanwhile, the revived Decca Records contacted Rouse to create a GrooveGrass mix of the Osborne Brothers "Rocky Top." A sure seller to University of Tennessee football fans, the CD single contained the original version, plus two wild GrooveGrass mixes of the bluegrass anthem.

"When Decca approached me with the 'Rocky Top' thing, I went to Sonny and said, 'Look. Here's what they want me to do. What do you think of it?' I told him if he didn't want me to do it, I wouldn't do it. So he and I talked about it awhile, and he and Bobby both said they thought it would be OK. Sonny's been such an inspiration for this, since he keeps me fired up about it. He's really been a person to be on my team with this stuff. It was just the three track master, sampled Bobby and Sonny from it, and the GrooveGrass Boyz played the whole track again."

About the same time, Imprint Records approached Rouse about a GrooveGrass version of the international hit, "The Macarena." Rouse didn't especially care for the song, but after talking with Wiseman and Ronnie McCoury, he made it a GrooveGrass Boyz project.

"'Macerena' is the reverse of GrooveGrass. That's where you take a pop song and make bluegrass. But the main goal of GrooveGrass is usually to take bluegrass and make it into a pop tune but save all the bluegrass parts of it.

"When we decided to do that song it all happened so fast...I had cut Mac and Del [McCoury] that morning and as fate would have it Doc and Jack [Lawrence] were coming in town that same day to do a show at the Ryman. So that afternoon before sound check I cut Doc's vocal and him clapping along with the track and then I cut Jack's guitar part. Everybody's part went on really fast. At that point Ronnie McCoury and I hadn't even re-written the verses yet. I put Mac's vocal on first in the chorus. As I was getting him mic'd and ready to sing I remembered this song was in Spanish. Well neither one of us speak Spanish and couldn't translate what they were singing, so the first words that came to my mind were 'She's the girl that they call MACARENA, she's the sweetest little thing that I've ever seen-uh, she laughs and she giggles and she talks real sweet, I said HEY MACARENA.' I cut Ronnie's vocal the day we mixed. From the time we decided to do it until it was recorded and mixed and mastered took two days. Ken Irwin [Rounder] and Barry Poss [Sugar Hill] were so understanding when we told them what was happening and that we'd like to 'borrow' their artists for this GrooveGrass single. We all really appreciated their enthusiasm and help."

Rouse has created a GrooveGrass recording label, already signing Mac Wiseman and Wilma Lee Cooper and talking with others. He plans to piggyback on major labels for distribution. The label offers a web site at <www.groovegrass.com>.

The GrooveGrass Boyz album appeared in a limited edition collector's CD in August. The Boyz here include Rouse, Wiseman, Watson, Del, Ron, and Rob McCoury, Mike Bub, Jason Carter, Terry Eldredge, Gene Wooten, Bootsy Collins, Steve Kaufman, and LeRoy Troy. "It's not entirely GrooveGrass. There's two hard-core 'grass tunes on there. 'White House Blues' and Del and the boys recut 'I Feel The Blues Moving In.' And they're hard-core. They're real. This is the best, believe, any of these guys have sounded. Gary Paczosa is the engineer. We really

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spent a lot of time with the recording of it—the setting up, getting them to sounding good.”

At the end of July, Rouse completed recording a trio album on Doc, Del, and Mac. “That session will be all acoustic, but we’re cutting one GrooveGrass version of a Christmas tune. Roger Troutman of the band Zapp will be on that cut as well as Bootsy Collins. The Christmas tune, which I’m writing, will be GrooveGrass. We’ll do three songs. We’ll probably do ‘Christmas Time’s A’comin.’ Actually there are two other albums that we have started. One of them, so far, we’re in negotiations with a major label for it, and the other one is kind of heating up. They’ll be hard-core GrooveGrass and then two or three hard-core bluegrass things. These people are fairly well-known in the bluegrass arena.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am about working with Wilma Lee Cooper. That will be a fun record. She’s wonderful. I’m so excited about it I can’t stand it. We’re going to start cutting and see what happens. We’ll see what she wants to do and what’s the best things for her to do, and what’s the best things for her to do in that GrooveGrass style. We get real stuff, traditional stuff, on it too, and GrooveGrass stuff so that the kids can get into it.”

Some kids must be getting it, and adults, too, judging by the dance and singles charts, along with considerable discussion on the Internet. It is a fun sound, strange, daring, danceable, with enough bluegrass elements embedded to keep your attention. Even if GrooveGrass becomes a flash-in-the-pan, it has already earned a reaction and serious consideration as a means for luring potential bluegrass fans. Lots of bluegrass folks may think GrooveGrass is the mad scientist approach to doing that, but clearly it has given many thousands of new listeners the chance to get interested in bluegrass.

“That’s the big underground vibe. We’re selling it. We’re selling a lot of those ‘Rocky Tops’ and ‘Macarenas.’ There isn’t anything else really out there. We’re selling so much GrooveGrass that the people in the bluegrass community and in the record label community are seeing it as a viable way to sell records. We’ve not only perked up the artists’ interest, but the major labels as well.”



Art Menius, former Executive Director of IBMA and manager of the Folk Alliance, operates Art's Artists, a booking agency, and serves as Associate Festival Coordinator of MerleFest. He is married to bluegrass photographer Becky Johnson.

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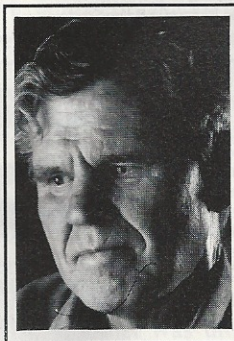
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